SIX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

AUGUST

15¢

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER ST... HE WE...

ONE MORE BRONC TO RIDE
DYNAMIC OUTLAW NOVEL
by WALT COBURN

THE BAR-V SHOVES 'EM NORTH!
TRAIL-DRIVE NOVEL
by WILLIAM R. COX

• ROAN • GIPSON •
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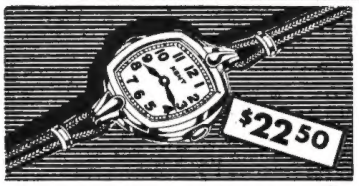

P214—Dainty Kent Watch for Ladies. 7 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate.
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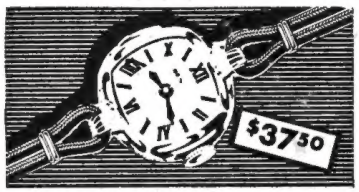

T683—Ladies' 17 jewel Benrus Watch. 10K yellow rolled gold plate.
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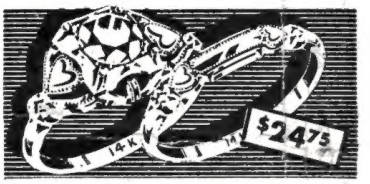

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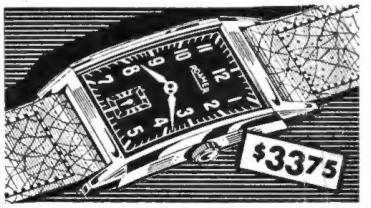

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I'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE IF I STICK TO MY PRESENT JOB
BUCK UP, BILL, WHY NOT TRY AN INDUSTRY THAT'S GROWING -- WHERE THERE'S MORE OPPORTUNITY

MARY'S RIGHT-- I'M NOT GETTING ANYWHERE. I OUGHT TO TRY A NEW FIELD TO MAKE MORE MONEY
LOOK AT THIS - RADIO IS CERTAINLY GROWING FAST -- AND THE NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE SAYS THEY TRAIN MEN FOR RADIO RIGHT AT HOME IN SPARE TIME
I DON'T THINK I COULD LEARN RADIO THAT WAY -- BUT THEY'LL SEND ME A SAMPLE LESSON FREE. GUESS I'LL MAIL THE COUPON AND LOOK INTO THIS

Find out how Practical it is to

TRAIN AT HOME FOR GOOD RADIO JOBS

Mail Coupon - Sample Lesson FREE

LEARNING RADIO THIS WAY IS GREAT. I'LL ENROLL NOW. SOON I'LL BE TRAINED TO MAKE GOOD MONEY FIXING RADIO SETS -- TO GET A GOOD JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION -- OR A GOVERNMENT CIVILIAN RADIO JOB -- OR WIN EXTRA RANK AND PAY IF I'M DRAFTED

J. E. SMITH, President NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE Established 28 Years

Mail the Coupon for a FREE lesson from my Radio Course. It shows you how N. R. I. trains you for Radio at home in spare time. And with this sample lesson I'll send my 64-page illustrated book, WIN RICH REWARDS IN RADIO. It describes the many fascinating jobs Radio offers, explains the unique training method which I have perfected during my 28 years of teaching Radio by mail.

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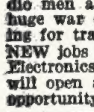
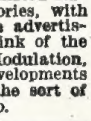


Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too



Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, much higher pay. Over 1,700 Service men are N. R. I. students. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after Service ends.

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You'll read a description of my Course—Extra Money Job Sheets—Consultation Service—other special N. R. I. training features. You'll see the fascinating jobs Radio offers and how to learn Radio at home. You'll read many letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning. And you'll have my free lesson to KEEP. No obligation. Just MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal!—J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 3HS9, Washington, D. C.

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BOMB HITS CROWDED ENGLISH HALL—GAS PERILS RESCUERS...

A true experience of Frederick Mockford, Incident Officer, Deptford District Civil Defense, London... as cablegrammed by a war correspondent.

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CLOSING TIME. BOMB WENT THROUGH
BILLIARD ROOM, CARRYING TABLES
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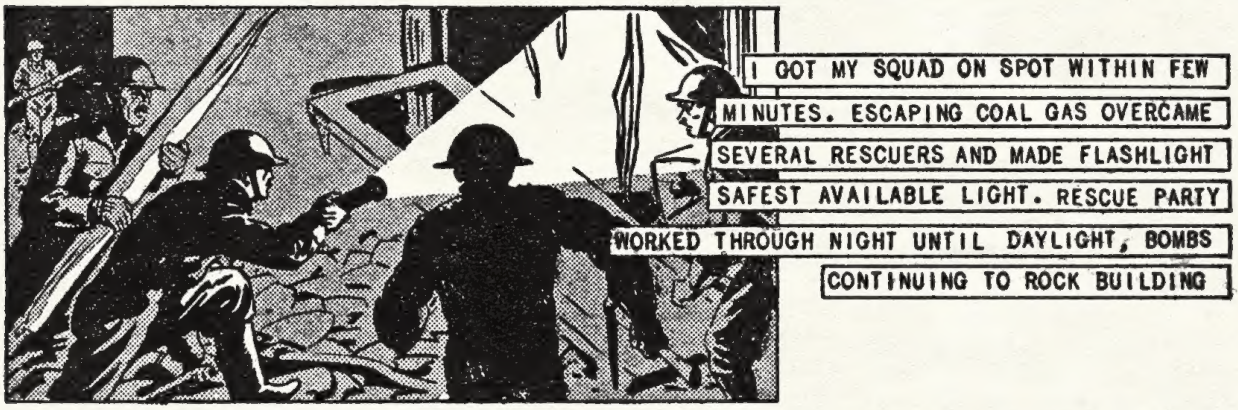
I GOT MY SQUAD ON SPOT WITHIN FEW
MINUTES. ESCAPING COAL GAS OVERCAME
SEVERAL RESCUERS AND MADE FLASHLIGHT
SAFEST AVAILABLE LIGHT. RESCUE PARTY
WORKED THROUGH NIGHT UNTIL DAYLIGHT, BOMBS
CONTINUING TO ROCK BUILDING

I SENT SOS CALL FOR BATTERIES.
THANKS TO FACT FRESH ONES WERE
AVAILABLE FOR JUST SUCH EMERGENCY WE
WERE INSTRUMENTAL SAVING LIVES
AT LEAST 15 PEOPLE.

Keep your batteries ready for emergencies!

Mr. Mockford's experience—like many such others that have come out of England—is typical of the many emergencies that call for the use of a flashlight. Any kind of open flame would have ignited the coal gas, blocking attempts at rescue.

For your own protection, as well as to conserve materials vitally needed elsewhere in this war, follow the suggestions and instructions of your local Defense Council. Reduce the use of your flashlight to a minimum. Make the batteries last longer!

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FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER...
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SIX SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY AUGUST, 1943 NUMBER THREE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **Six Complete Short Novels** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

ONE MORE BRONC TO RIDE!.....*WALT COBURN* 8

A crooked badge-toter and his pool-room posse were hunting Pete Braddigan as a jail-break fugitive. . . . And Pete's only chance to get away was to win a live-or-die battle with a killer-horse, thoughtfully furnished by Pete's best enemy!

HOSS GREER'S HALF INTEREST IN HELL..*HARRY F. OLMSTED* 26

In all that rich range, only Hoss Greer's wise old eyes penetrated the oily benefactor's mask of Buford Lutley. . . . To see beneath, the blood-mad face of destruction incarnate!

THEY GROW 'EM TOUGH ON THE LLANO!.....*FRED GIPSON* 42

Banks Presnall paid all too careful heed to the admonition: "There's times when every man meets something he can't git around. Then he needs a gun to blast himself through!"

DEATH-SONG OF THE FLYING J.....*TOM ROAN* 62

In the wild Devil's Bugle country, the first man to shoot was the last to die. But a hidden killer was making sure that no honest man had a chance to draw a gun!

AN OUTCAST RIDES THE BOOTHILL WATCH *PHILIP KETCHUM* 84

Like a greedy, merciless spider, Aaron Taft fattened on the hard-won range of God-fearing ranchers—who, helplessly, were drawn ever farther into his red murder-web!

THE BAR V SHOVES 'EM NORTH!.....*WILLIAM R. COX* 100

Roaring Dodge, at the end of the Texas trail, meant a hell-ripping time to most dusty cowpunchers, but to Dan Smith it meant one last hot-lead gamble!

★ ★ **Star Features** ★ ★

THE BRANDING CORRAL.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* 6

The place where everyone who gets a thrill from the old West can put his brand on almost any kind of augurment!

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* 124

Introducing one of our *Star Westerners*—a Texas writing man.

SEPTEMBER ISSUE OUT AUGUST 11th!

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The Branding Corral

Conducted by Strawboss

One Old-Timer makes his bet on what he thinks is the greatest frontier horse-race in all history. . . . A friendly gathering place for all who are interested in the old West.

AS ALWAYS, in the West, it was—and still is—the Man on Horseback, whether he was riding point on five thousand longhorns, shoving 'em North; leading a charge against wily Apache raiders down in New Mexico, risking his neck on the hurricane deck of a green bronc at seven bucks a head—or "carrying the mail" for the Pony Express.

As J. G. Williamson, of Lincoln, Nebraska, says in his letter below, the Man on Horseback sometimes did other things than chouse cattle. Here's his opinion. Do you agree with him?

Dear Strawboss:

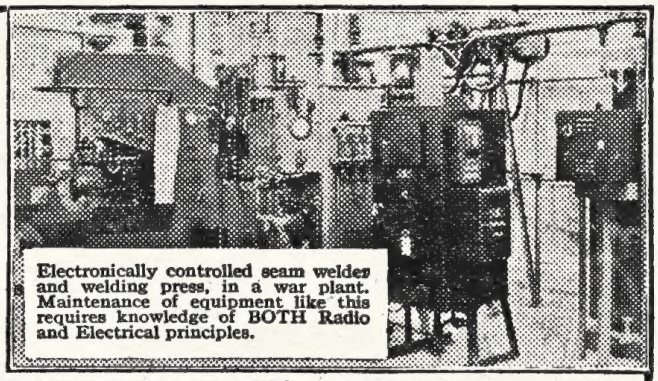
I visited Chicago recently to see my daughter-in-law. They took me to see my first horse race since I used to watch 'em run in Dodge City, back in the days when that cowtown capitol stood on her hind legs and howled. Well sir, we clumb up into the grandstand so far that we had to look at the horses through binoculars. They were mighty fine running horses, but I'd sure hate to have to use one as a cutting horse to work cattle with. Trouble was that I couldn't tell which one I'd bet my two dollars on until I found out that the race was over and my feller didn't do so good. The place was crowded with peanut eaters, and a lot of these funny hats that the women now wear kept getting between me and the track, even when I did have the chance to use the glasses. There wasn't hardly room to breathe, and when we got out, I decided I'd get along all right without seeing a horse race like that, unless I could get down close-to and see what was what, and anyhow get a smell of the stables and a glimpse of the jockeys.

I was just a greenhorn kid when I

(Please turn to page 126)

ELECTRONICS

offers sensational opportunities to MEN WHO WILL LEARN RADIO AND-



Electronically controlled seam welder and welding press, in a war plant. Maintenance of equipment like this requires knowledge of BOTH Radio and Electrical principles.

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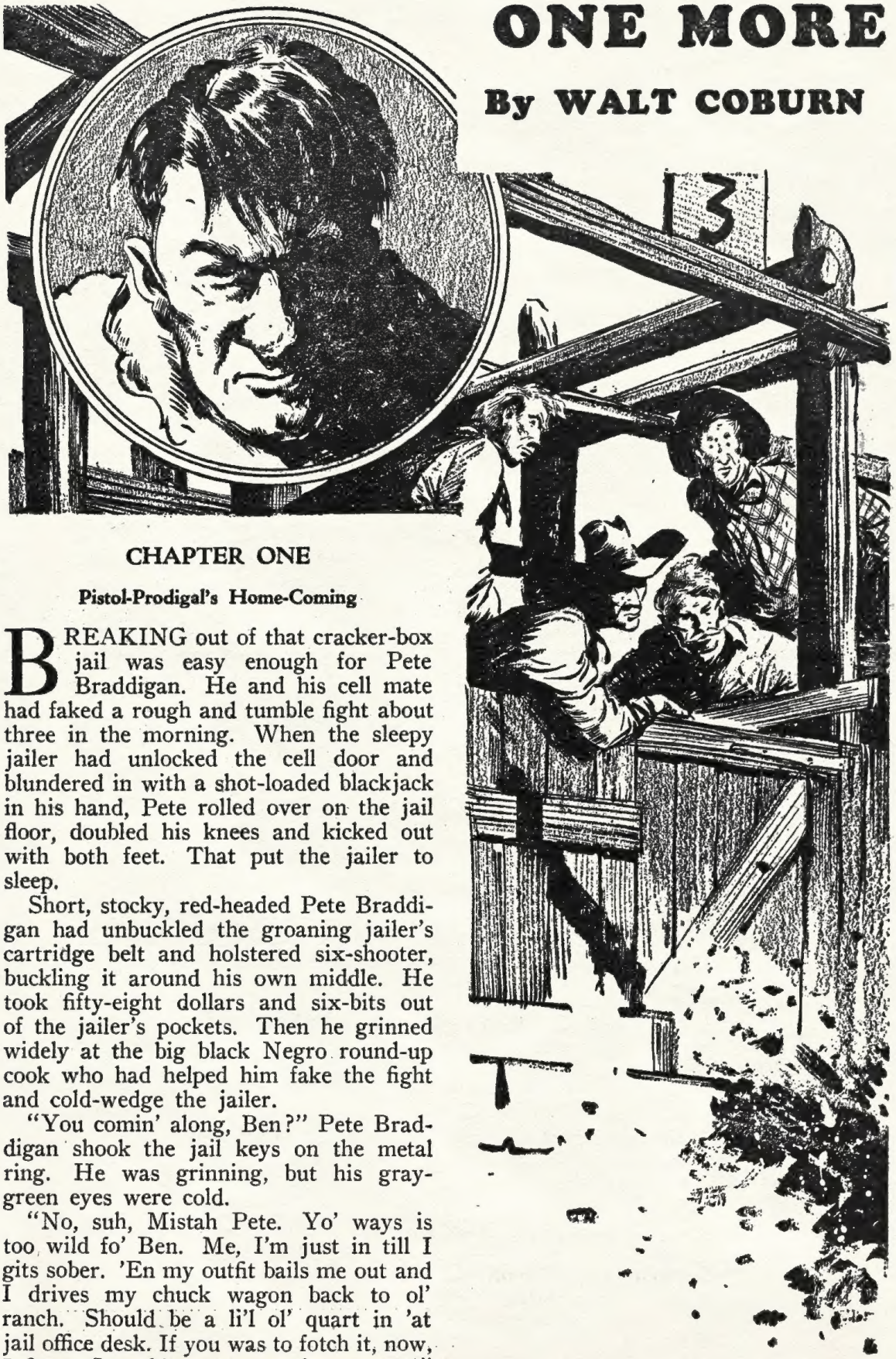
ONE MORE

By WALT COBURN



CHAPTER ONE

Pistol-Prodigal's Home-Coming

BREAKING out of that cracker-box jail was easy enough for Pete Braddigan. He and his cell mate had faked a rough and tumble fight about three in the morning. When the sleepy jailer had unlocked the cell door and blundered in with a shot-loaded blackjack in his hand, Pete rolled over on the jail floor, doubled his knees and kicked out with both feet. That put the jailer to sleep.

Short, stocky, red-headed Pete Braddigan had unbuckled the groaning jailer's cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter, buckling it around his own middle. He took fifty-eight dollars and six-bits out of the jailer's pockets. Then he grinned widely at the big black Negro round-up cook who had helped him fake the fight and cold-wedge the jailer.

"You comin' along, Ben?" Pete Braddigan shook the jail keys on the metal ring. He was grinning, but his gray-green eyes were cold.

"No, suh, Mistah Pete. Yo' ways is too wild fo' Ben. Me, I'm just in till I gits sober. 'En my outfit bails me out and I drives my chuck wagon back to ol' ranch. Should be a li'l ol' quart in 'at jail office desk. If you was to fotch it, now, I figger I could sure use a few snorts!"

BRONC TO RIDE! • •

A Drama-Packed Novel of Old Montana

Pete's brain went dizzy from the jarring impact of the punishment he was taking every time that blue roan's hoofs hit the ground. . . .

It looked as if Pete Braddigan, jail-break bronc-rider, was stepping into the toughest bear-trap ever to snare a hunted man. . . . For Captain Hank Kidd was giving him a chance to hit it for the Badlands on that big outlaw bronc, Hell Broke Loose—which had killed every top-hand rider that ever tried to sit its saddle!

"I'll git it, Ben. See you at the HK ranch."

The giant Negro shook his head. "Mistah Pete," he pleaded, "you sho' don' mean that. Mistah Hank Kidd, he shoot you, fer sho'!"

Pete Braddigan grinned and left the jail cell. He was back in a minute or two with the quart of rye whiskey, passed it to the round-up cook, then locked Ben and the burly jailer in the cell and took the keys with him.

Pete Braddigan was short and thick shouldered. His stocky legs were saddle-bowed, but he moved with the quick, yet smooth action that comes from the perfect co-ordination of brain and muscle. Pete Braddigan was rated as one of the greatest bronc riders and ropers of all time. And his ways were wild and reckless.

He stopped long enough in the jail office to get his hat and some tobacco and cigarette papers. Then he was outside the jail and locking it, and tossing the keys into a brush patch. He made his way on foot down the back alleyways of Long Valley, Montana. Keeping to the shadows, his hat pulled low across his eyes.

Tomorrow was the Fourth of July, and Long Valley was having its annual rodeo. The night was warm and a little sultry and the star-filled sky was spotted with heavy rain clouds. In the far distance, across the flat benchlands and rolling hills beyond, sounded the rumble of thunder and the skyline was streaked with lightning.

The weather suited the mood of Pete Braddigan. Come hell or high water, it didn't make much difference. That big burly jailer had told him, with colorful profanity maligning the name of a dead man, that Pete's father had been shot.

"Somebody," the big jailer had leered at Pete Braddigan, "rid Montana of that whiskey-soaked old man of yourn. Got the country rid of the damned ol' no-account cattle thief. The coroner looked the carcass over an' had some 'breeds dig a hole. They wrapped old Mike Braddigan in a' ol' tarp an' dropped the carcass in the hole, then tromped on the grave. . . . I hear it's cut an' dried, with you pleadin' guilty to cattle rustlin'. Twenty-five years, you sorrel-maned shanty Irish son! As long as my name is Clem Hobson I'll never forget what Mike Braddigan did to me!"

Pete Braddigan had grinned through the jail bars at the big jailer who had once ranched near the Braddigan place. That news about the old man was a gut shot, but he wasn't giving this big hunk of hog meat any satisfaction.

"Still wear the marks of the whippin' my dad gave you once for butcherin' a Shamrock beef, Clem? Supposin' the old man is dead? I ain't. And I'll live long enough to git the man or men that killed him. So if you had a hand in it, you pot-gutted false alarm, you better quit the country!"

So big Clem Hobson had put the drunken Black Ben into the same jail cell with Pete Braddigan because he thought that sharing a cell with a drunken Negro would make for Pete's discomfort.

It had turned out somewhat differently than Jailer Clem Hobson had expected. Though Ben worked for Hank Kidd's HK outfit, and Kidd had jailed Pete for cattle rustling, the giant round-up cook and the red headed bronc-rider were old friends. And between them they had staged as realistic a jail fight as they could. Pete had a black eye and his nose dripped blood and his mouth was smashed. Ben hadn't pulled his punches.

★

PETE BRADDIGAN cast a weather eye at the distant storm. He stood back in the shadows of the night and watched the little cow town of Long Valley celebrating. Gambling was wide open; anything went. Cowboys afoot or on horseback roaming the main street, in and out of the half dozen saloons. Saddled horses at the hitchracks. Even the Mercantile Store was staying open all night to sell hats and shirts and levis to the cowhands who were flocking into town. The street decorated with red, white and blue bunting.

Even at three o'clock in the morning, that little cow town was alive and booming. Cowboys were painting the town red; saloons packed, and gambling tables filled. Fourth of July at Long Valley always began the evening of the Third, when the ranchers and cowhands began

trickling into town. The ranchers with their wives and families. The cowpunchers riding their town horses. It was tough and noisy and colorful.

Old Man Mike Braddigan had always looked forward for weeks to the celebration at Long Valley. More than a few times he had bet everything from his cattle-and-horse outfit down to the shirt on his back that his boy Pete would win the bronc-riding and roping.

The fighting Irish pride of Old Man Mike Braddigan had been something immortal. Fierce, profane, whiskey-fumed, and almighty splendid. But it was Pete who had had to pick up the old man's fights and win them, one way or another.

He'd had to do that since the day Pete's mother had died, and the old man had drowned his terrible grief with the first whiskey he'd touched since the birth of his boy, fifteen years before. Never once had young Pete blamed or complained against the old man.

The Shamrock outfit had, as one cowhand put it, gone a little weedy. He didn't say that it was loco weed which was taking the Shamrock range, but everybody knew what he meant. Old Man Mike Braddigan was drinking away his outfit, treating the barflies who laughed at him behind his back. Letting horse thieves and cattle rustlers use the Shamrock ranch for a way-station, while Pete was away at Calgary or Cheyenne or Miles City winning enough money at cowboy contests to pay off the old man's debts.

Those renegades who used old man Mike Braddigan would be a long ways gone by the time tough, red-headed Pete got back. Old Man Mike would be sodden with booze.

Pete would grin and show him the prizes he'd won, clean up the boar's nest of a log house, wash the dishes and scrub the floors and put old man Mike Braddigan to bed with a bath and a clean nightshirt; milk toddies with plenty of eggs. With never a word of reprimand or scolding. And many a night Pete had sat up with his father through the black hours when the banshees and black devils were at the old man.

A week ago Pete Braddigan returned from Miles City with his pockets crammed with prize money. At the Shamrock ranch, he found the sheriff and stock inspector waiting for him and old man Mike moaning and groaning, unshaven, and without a bite of grub in his belly for a week.

The sheriff and stock inspector had taken Pete Braddigan down into the rough pasture. In the gray dawn they had shown Pete about a hundred head of stolen cattle. Four quarters of beef in the meat house. A hide with the brand cut out. The brand—Hank Kidd's HK iron—clumsily buried under the butt of a haystack.

The cattle in the rough pasture were HK cattle, whose brand had been cleverly worked into the Braddigan Shamrock. It had taken an expert to do that job.

"You left Miles City a week ago," said the stock inspector. "Me 'n the sheriff done checked up on that. It takes two days to ride back here to your ranch. If you kin alibi your three-four days and nights, you'll be in the clear. And that throws the burden of guilt on your old man. I hope you kin talk yourself outa this, Pete."

Pete grinned flatly and pointed at the sodden, snoring figure of his father. He asked the two law officers how a broken old man in that kind of shape could alter the brands on those cattle.

"I'm your huckleberry, gentlemen. But before we pull out for town, I'd like to git the old man back into shape. It'll take all day. Mebbyso part of tomorrow night. I won't rabbit on you. Here's my Miles City winnin's—five thousand bucks. I'll put it up for myself. Pocket it. I'll git the old man into shape."

"What's wrong, Pete?" Old Man Mike asked after Pete had cleaned him up and given him a warm eggnog. "The sheriff an' stock inspector here?"

"I'm dickering for some cattle," Pete Braddigan had lied to his old man. "Ride into town when you git feelin' right an' watch me ride that big HK outlaw they call Hell Broke Loose. Bet your nightshirt. . . .

Now, Old Man Mike Braddigan was dead—murdered. And Pete had broken jail and was on the dodge. He was shedding no tears. The old man was better off dead than suffering through those broken years. But somebody had killed the old

man, and Pete Braddigan was on the prowl.

★

THE contest grounds were out of town about a mile. There were plenty of saddled horses standing at the hitchracks, left there by hard drinking cowhands who didn't know how to treat the horse that packed them. Some of those horses had been ridden forty and fifty miles and were gaunt and hungry.

It was a risky thing to do but it was typical of Pete Braddigan. He went from hitchrack to hitchrack, unsaddling horses and slipping off their bridles or hackamores. The hungry and leg weary horses could drift off into the early dawn to find water at the river and plenty of good feed along its bank. He left saddles and blankets, bridles and hackamores on the ground by the hitchracks.

There was one saddled horse that Pete Braddigan was saving to ride out to the rodeo ground. He'd hide out there and lay low until the crowd gathered about noon to watch the contests.

Tonight's celebrating cow country would be a little loose-tongued. A man might pick up a word here or there. So when Pete Braddigan got through setting afoot the men who did their carousing before they took care of their horses, he was riding out alone to the contest grounds, and taking a cowpuncher shelter behind the bucking chutes.

He was more or less disguised by a week's stubble of wiry red whiskers, and he'd roll in the dust and dirt to stain his clothes, changing the four-dented crown of his sombrero into a flattened, California-style hat he could fairly well conceal his identity.

Pete Braddigan had emptied the hitchrocks, and now he unbuckled his cartridge belt and shoved the .45 cartridges into his pocket. He took the six-shooter from its holster and shoved it into the waistband of his levis. Then he threw the empty cartridge belt and holster away.

He stood there in the dark street in the hour before dawn, listening to the celebration inside the saloons; a drunken song, the cursing of a rough and tumble fight. Drinking it all in, as the old man would be doing tonight, if he wasn't buried in a tramped-down grave.

It was hard for Pete Braddigan to hate life, or the men who made it. Pete loved to laugh, play rough jokes and swap lies. He had never killed a man; never shot at a man. He never drank, excepting for a few little drinks that gave him a glow and left him unhurt. Sometimes he wouldn't smoke because some trainer of prize fighters told him that smoking hurt his wind.

But somebody had killed the old man, and that changed it all. He'd fork this big HK bay gelding and ride on out to the contest grounds, lay low and see and hear what there was to be found out.

"I hate like hell," said a voice behind Pete, "to be set afoot!"

Pete whirled and slid his stolen gun into his hand. The tall, lean man who had been flattened against the shadowed saloon wall came into sight, brushing the back of his hand against his heavy gray mustache. He walked with the stiff-legged gait that becomes the habit of some seasoned cowmen. There was a stiff-backed, military dignity about him.

"You'd be ridin' a long stirrup," said the mustached man, "for them short laigs of yourn."

Pete tensed. The gun in his hand pointed at the tall man's belly.

"I just broke jail," Pete licked his dry lips and his voice sounded harsh in his own ears, "to kill you. Nobody else coulda shot Old Man Mike. You got a gun, Mister Kidd. Claw for it!"

Hank Kidd lifted both hands to the level of his shoulders. "I didn't kill Mike Braddigan, son. But I stand accused of his murder tonight. There's no bench warrant out yet. But they're tar-daubing the name of Captain Hank Kidd with the black charge of murder. Now put away that gun, Pete, before you kill the only friend you may have on earth, if the goin' gets rough!"

Pete felt his face grow hot as he shoved the six-shooter back into its holster. This was the owner of big HK outfit, sometimes known as Captain Kidd, land pirate. But whatever was said against this tall, lanky cowman, no man had ever been able to prove him a coward. And murder was not in his nature. Ruthless, bitter and

silent for the most part, Captain Hank Kidd played his game and lived his life according to his own lights.

"Step back into the shadows, Pete," said Captain Hank Kidd, "Keep your hand away from your gun. If I was guilty of killing Mike Braddigan, then I could have killed his son Pete as you turned loose those horses. . . . I liked the way you and Black Ben did that trick, Pete. I'll double that black cook's wages."

"Where?" asked Pete Braddigan, a queer grin on his freckled, stubbled, dusty face, "was you?"

"Lookin' from the outside, in through the jail window."

Pete was beginning to feel like a schoolboy caught playing some fool prank. He had met the notorious Captain Hank Kidd only once before, though the Shamrock outfit was no more than fifty miles from the big HK outfit. That one time had been up at Calgary, when Pete had won a lot of the prize money and trophies and was getting ready to pull out for home. And this same tall, lean man with the gray mustache and hard gray eyes had stopped him.

"You rode a bronc today, young Pete Braddigan," Captain Hank Kidd had said in that deep, quiet voice of his, "that I never thought could be ridden. Will you hire out to me? Ramrod my outfit and write your own ticket."

"I got the old man," Pete had told this big millionaire cowman, "to look out for. So I'll string along with Mike Braddigan."

Captain Hank Kidd had the sense then not to bother the little red-headed bronc rider. He had stood there at the Calgary Stampede contest grounds and watched Pete carry his saddle, his trophies, his quick moving blocky weight through crowds of admirers, men and women, a grin on his snub-nosed, freckled face and his only goal the Shamrock ranch in the Montana badlands.

Captain Hank Kidd's hard gray eyes had misted a little that day, because he knew what Pete Braddigan was up against—what that tough, grinning cowhand was going back to face. A whiskey-sodden father whom he loved with a blind faith that could see in that man nothing wrong or wicked.

Captain Kidd had known where Pete's prize money was going to pay the debts of old man Mike Braddigan, who had slipped far into the bog and whose cowman's word was no longer good.

"I'd like to see you take a crack," said Captain Kidd now, "at that big bronc of mine called Hell Broke Loose. Slim Smith has drawed the bronc. Slim's number is Thirteen. Be in behind the chutes, and I'll be sayin' it with a thousand dollars that Hell Broke Loose gits rode.

"You take Slim's number, and you know the bronc. The far gate will be open. Till then, I'll keep the law off your back. . . . Now ride them long stirrups out to the grounds, Pete. Then pull the bridle off Reader an' hang it on the saddle horn. He'll come back to Captain Kidd."

CHAPTER TWO

Stampede!

PETE BRADDIGAN was riding the big Reader horse and within a hundred yards of the contest grounds when the sultry storm broke with a lightning-ripped, black fury.

It was one of those freak Montana storms that comes out of a troubled sky. Wind that was strong enough to whip the hat off a man's head or whirl a horse around to hump up, rump against the brunt of it. Then it was like a lake dropped down out of a black sky, and the wind whipping the water like a dam broke loose. The sky as black as the inside of a cave, lashed rain and wind, until a jagged lightning flash turned the blackness into a white, blinding glare that seared a man's eyeballs.

In one of those flashes, Pete saw a fair sized bunch of steers, some of those hump-shouldered Brahma bulls of Captain Kidd's being driven into a big pole corral. Hank Kidd had trailed a lot of those ornery Brahmas into Montana and crossed them with longhorns. Mixing the two dispositions into a half breed steer that would fight until it died. They were ornery, and off-colored, but had speed, toughness and endurance.

That cattle drive was spooked now by the crash of thunder and lightning. At the corral gate they whirled and milled, and were gone like a bat out of hell. And

God have mercy on the cowboy and his horse caught in their stampede!

Pete Braddigan saw it happen in that one split second of another lightning flash, and thunder came down out of the black sky with a deafening roar.

He saw the steers break and run; horses and riders caught in the rip-tide of cattle. And he saw Kate Burkey on that big buckskin gelding of hers, plain as a lighted picture.

Kate, her hat gone and the rain plastering down her tawny hair, was forking that big HK buckskin with the black mane and tail and the broad black stripe down his back, known as the HK dun. That big outlaw bronc Pete Braddigan had won when he bet a lot of money he could ride it. Pete had gentled and tamed that ex-outlaw, and finally had turned it into one of those horses that will kneel down to let a lady mount him. Then he'd given the big buckskin to Kate Burkey, daughter of Horse Thief Burkey, down where Seven Mile Creek empties into the wide Missouri.

It was at the Burkey ranch where Pete had stayed for a few days and nights on his return from Miles City, lazing around and roundsiding, doing the ranch chores by day because Horse Thief Burkey was 'away somewheres'. And riding in the moonlight with the tawny-haired Kate, counting the stars. But he couldn't tell that in court, or to any man on earth.

Now Kate and that big HK dun were caught in that stampede of fighting cattle. Pete gigged the big Reader horse with his spurs and charged into the mess. And then there were two of them, Pete and Kate, mounted on the two best horses in the country, and slapping those half breed brahmas across the eyes with doubled ropes.

Now and then Pete would grab a steer's tail and crowd the big Reader horse close and dally the end of the tail around his saddle horn. Then the fighting Brahma would be thrown hard.

It took some minutes of hard, dangerous work, cowpuncher skill, and a lot of luck to shove that bunch of bawling, fighting cattle into the corral. Pete and the big Reader horse had born the brunt of it, but Kate Burkey and the big HK dun were battered and bruised. The girl's clothes were torn and her tanned face, with its short nose and firm chin—white looking now, in the glare of the lightning—was scratched and blood-smeared.

Pete Braddigan swung the heavy pole gate shut and shoved the long wooden peg into the gate post to hold it. Then he roped it shut to lock it.

Kate Burkey sat her big dun horse. The downpour had slacked to a heavy drizzle that was suddenly cold and got through a man's clothes and chilled him. Pete was soaking wet and his clothes were ripped and torn where a steer had raked his ribs, tearing away his shirt and leaving a scratch along his ribs. But the lightning flash showed a grin on his freckled face and his eyes were as green in the glaring light as slivers of bottle glass.

"Long time no see you, Kate." He swung aboard the big Reader horse.

His tone was bitter, matching the hardness of his gray-green eyes as he coiled his wet, muddy rope.

"Why aren't you in jail where you belong?" she came back at him.

"The roof caved in and I crawled out. What are you doin' here, workin' with a sorry bunch of corral hands that's quit the flats?"

"I've got about ten head of steers in that bunch. Gettin' paid a few dollars a day for their use."

"Your father got back home yet from that trip he was on last week?"

"Deal my father out," said Kate Burkey. "You try to drag him into your cattle-rustlin' business, and I'll make you wish you were born dead!"

In the lightning flare, Kate Burkey's black eyes looked like red-black coals.

Pete told her she had better ride on to town and get dried out. And take care of her horse.

"Where are you going?" she asked him, breaking a heavy silence.

"Where I kin do the most good for myself, lady."

Pete rode away at a long trot, headed south towards the badlands. He got away just in time, for the cowhands who had been handling the cattle were coming back.

"Who was that feller helpin' you pen them cattle?" asked a voice in the dark. "Who gathered that mess, Kate?"

"It wasn't you, Buster," sounded Kate Burkey's voice. "You have a yellow streak a foot wide down your back. Get away from me, and stay away."

As he heard that, Pete grinned into the rain that was washing the blood from his freckled face. Then he rode on about a mile from the contest grounds and the town lights. Patches of stars showed in the sky where the clouds were breaking.

Before the drizzle let up, he rode slowly back to the contest grounds and dismounted. He took the bridle off the big Reader horse and hung it on the saddle horn, rubbing its ears, and sending him back to town with an affectionate slap on the rump.

Then he crawled in under the shelter of a hay wagon and curled in a knot and went to sleep.

Kate Burkey could have come into court and given him a clean alibi. But she had stayed away. Tonight Pete Braddigan had saved her—and the big dun horse he'd given her—from being crippled or killed. And she had not even thanked him!

The last thing Pete Braddigan thought about when he dropped into a half sleep was where Horse Thief Burkey had been the night Mike Braddigan was killed. And where had been her big, tough, loud-mouthed brother, Buster Burkey, who never worked hard but always had folding money in his pockets. It was his constant brag that he'd ramrod the big HK outfit when he married Dixie Kidd, the daughter of Captain Hank Kidd.

It was almost dawn when Pete Braddigan bedded down and it was breaking day when he rubbed the sleepiness out of his eyes.

It was going to be one of those rainy Fourths, bringing muddy grounds and wet ropes and danger for a bronc-rider. Loops would miss and bucking horses would lose their footing when they pitched. That red white and blue bunting in town would be sodden, the colors run together and hanging lifelessly in front of the saloons and stores.

There would be a lot of sore-headed cowhands set afoot and pawing their saddles out of the mud at the hitchracks.

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2. APPLY LATHER or Brushless Shaving Cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently
3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves
4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

This was going to be a sorry kind of a Fourth of July for Long Valley. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Manhunt Rodeo

THE clouds broke apart and the sun came out. But the rodeo grounds were muddy and as slippery as axle grease. Captain Hank Kidd sat up in the judge's stand with the only stop-watch in that part of the Montana cow-country. Women sat in buckboards and spring wagons, holding black umbrellas and colored parasols, dressed in their Sunday best. Youngsters nibbling striped stick candy and horehound sticks. All looked a little damp but plenty happy.

Weather-beaten ranchers, and cowhands. And you could tell the ones who had been set afoot last night by the look on their faces. A breed was rounding up their loose horses now and corraling them.

Pete Braddigan was mud-smeared. He kept away from the other cowpunchers behind the chutes. When he saw a tall, slim cowboy in a red shirt wearing the contestant's Number 13, Pete made his way unobtrusively to his side.

"I'll buy your entrance fee an' number, Slim feller, for fifty eight dollars and six-bits. I'd like a crack at ridin' that bronc called Hell Broke Loose."

The tall slim contestant took the number off the back of his red shirt and handed it to Pete Braddigan. He handed Pete back about half the money.

"The entrance fee was ten bucks, mister. You look like you bin on a week's drunk and nobody but a drunk would pay that much dough to ride that man-killer. I'm givin' you some money back to pay your buryin' expenses. They'll find it in your pocket when that big blue roan bronc tromps your guts out.

"I work fer the HK outfit an' I ride the rough string fer Captain Hank Kidd. But drunk er sober, I wouldn't go into the corral with that big blue roan. . . . Here, take back your money, feller. Don't tackle that bronc. I'll take back my 13 number and ask the judges fer another horse. Nobody had to ride that big Hell Broke Loose killer. They'll gimme another bronc. . . ."

Pete Braddigan rubbed his stubble of dirty red whiskers and grinned. His hard green eyes, one of them blackened and swollen almost shut, glittered. He shook his head and fastened the Number 13 on his back.

He saw Kate Burkey up in the judge's stand talking to Captain Hank Kidd. She was entered in the trick riding and fancy roping, and was dressed now in tailored cowgirl clothes.

Across from the judge's stand in a yellow wheeled buckboard with a canvas top, holding the lines of her perfectly matched chestnut sorrel team, sat Dixie Kidd, slim, black-haired, with smoky gray eyes.

With her was the HK ramrod and wagon boss, Ross Platte. Ross was a top cowhand and a range dude. He was a good bet to win the bronc-riding and roping. A yellow-haired six-footer, Platte was a ladies' man in town or at the country dances.

Then Pete saw big Buster Burkey ride up to the buckboard and lean from his saddle to say something to Dixie Kidd. Buster was dressed in a fancy rodeo outfit that rivaled Ross Platte's. He was running the contest and held a red megaphone in his hand.

Pete Braddigan saw Ross Platte scowl and pull his hat down across his eyes. Dixie's white teeth showing when she smiled. Then Buster Burkey rode out into the muddy arena with his red megaphone to make one of his loud-mouthed speeches.

Pete squatted on his heels in behind the chutes and kept out of the way. He located a bucking saddle and sat it there on the muddy ground, setting the stirrups to fit his legs. Nobody paid him any attention. There were a lot of ranch hands around the chutes, dirty and unshaven. Wearing clothes like Pete wore, and mud-spattered from the ride into town.

The calf roping was run off and Buster Burkey's loud voice announced that it had been won by Ross Platte.

"By Ross Platte and his horse, folks! A lucky loop and a top rope horse! That brought home the bacon!"

Kate Burkey did her trick riding and fancy roping. Her tawny hair was cut to shoulder length; she looked as trim and fit as a ballet dancer.

Now Buster Burkey was announcing the bronc-riding. His loud, brassy voice sounded blatantly through the megaphone:

"The rough string gent from the HK outfit has drawed that famous blue roan outlaw bronc called Hell Broke Loose. But somehow Slim Smith has disappeared. So unless some man with more nerve than brains wants to ride the big blue roan, we'll turn him outa the chute. The outlaw bronc no man has ever rode!"

Pete Braddigan went over to the bucking chute with his saddle. He shouldered a couple of corral hands out of his way.

"I'll set the bear trap myself," he told them.

The big stout blue roan bronc was too wise to wear himself out in the bucking chute. He stood there sullen, every muscle tense and bunched, while Pete Braddigan cinched on the saddle and tightened the flank bucking strap.

The corral hands working the chutes watched him with a sort of bewilderment. They thought he was another hired hand around the chutes, perhaps still fighting last night's hangover.

Then Pete Braddigan climbed over the chute and eased himself into the saddle, shoving his feet into the stirrups. From under the slanted brim of his mud-caked hat he looked up at the judge's stand and grinned at Captain Hank Kidd.

Then he barked at the dazed looking man at the chute gate: "Open 'er up, son! He's mine!"

Buster Burkey was making one of his fancied comical speeches, telling some stale cow-camp joke. As the chute gate swung open, the big blue roan outlaw came out, pitching, twisting, squealing and grunting. And in the saddle sat a mud spattered, whiskered cowhand with his battered hat in his right hand, slapping at the bronc's lowered head, both feet swinging and spur rowels raking from shoulder to flank.

"It's Pete Braddigan!" Dixie Kidd was standing up in her fancy buckboard, yelling at the top of her voice. *"Ride, Pete!"*

★

NEAR the chutes Kate Burkey sat her trick horse. Tears welled to her black eyes and she bit her under lip until the blood came.

Up in the judge's stand Captain Hank Kidd clenched a lean hand over his stop watch until the pressure of his fingers broke the crystal. His other hand tugged at the ends of his drooping mustache. He was standing as straight-backed and rigid as a wooden figure, his eyes blazing under craggy brows.

The big blue bronc knew all the tricks and was using them. Pete Braddigan kept fanning the bent neck with his hat, as he spurred. Blood began to trickle from his nose, and his ears filled with it. His brain went dizzy from the jarring impact of the punishment he was taking every time that big blue roan bronc hit the ground.

This was a pay-day ride, and Pete Braddigan was making it. Hell Broke Loose was twisting and pitching, sunfishing, whirling. Then, after a million years, the big roan bronc was bucked out and stampeding. Pete Braddigan fanned the bronc towards the open gate at the far end of the muddy arena.

He was through the open gate and out, and the crowd was still held by the spell of that spectacular ride, too dazed to cheer the greatest bronc-rider and the toughest bronc they had ever seen in action. . . .

Burly Clem Hobson, on the prowl around the rodeo grounds, finally snapped out of it and began yelling for men to form a posse.

Dixie Kidd was still standing up, holding the lines of her restless team, her eyes shining, when Ross Platte rode up and joined her.

Buster Burkey looked a little sick and his loud voice was silent.

Captain Hank Kidd looked at his broken stop-watch, and grinned behind his gray mustache.

Kate Burkey quit her trick pinto horse and saddle. She threw her stock saddle with its catch rope on the back of the big line-backed buckskin. Only Captain Hank Kidd noticed Kate as she spurred out of the far gate.

Clem Hobson was getting his posse together—a crowd of corral-hands and town cowboys who would be lost beyond the outskirts of Long Valley. No real cowhand would throw in with Clem Hobson's posse for any amount of long green money.

"Five dollars a day, men," shouted

Clem Hobson, "and found." His face was bruised and swollen where Pete Braddigan had kicked him. A couple of front teeth were missing.

"Keep your money in your pocket, Hobson," said Slim Smith. "We don't none of us need it that bad."

Buster Burkey handed his red megaphone over to another leather-lunged man who liked the sound of his own voice. He fastened a carbine in a scabbard to his saddle. He'd picked up the saddle-gun from its hiding place behind the corrals.

Buster looked big and tough and mighty grim as he rode up to Clem Hobson and talked to the burly jailer in a low tone. Clem Hobson shook his head, then shrugged his thick shoulders and nodded. He unpinned his deputy sheriff badge and handed it over to Buster Burkey. Buster fastened it on his flannel shirt and grinned crookedly.

"We'll fetch Pete Braddigan back," said Buster Burkey, "but he won't be knowin' it. He'll be comin' feet first in a wagon."

Captain Hank Kidd motioned Ross Platte over to the judge's stand.

"You or any other HK cowhand that throws in with that posse is fired." His voice was a deep-throated growl.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bushwhack Stand-Off

PETE BRADDIGAN slowed down the big blue roan bronc to cool him off and get his second sweat. Hell Broke Loose was big and stout and tough enough to carry a man there and back, but that bucking had dragged as much out of the horse as it had the man. The blue roan, nearly black now with sweat, was dripping. But the big bronc was settling down now to a sullen trot that would slack to a walk after while. And if a posse on fresh horses were taking in after Pete they'd be able to overhaul him within a ten-mile stretch.

Pete rubbed the blood out of his ears and after a while his nose stopped bleeding. But his head felt thick and clogged and dizzy. He looked back across his shoulder and saw a lone rider coming at him, shortening the distance between them at a long lope.

Pete slowed the big blue roan down to a running walk and slid the six-shooter from the waistband of his overalls. He'd set that jasper afoot, or get gut-shot trying. Then his bloodshot, gray-green eyes recognized both horse and rider. Kate Burkey was on the big buckskin that had once been as hard to sit as this roan called Hell Broke Loose.

"Put up your gun, Pete," said Kate Burkey as she rode up. "You don't shoot women. . . . Let's swap ponies."

"Let's *what?*"

"Step down, bonehead. Hell Broke Loose belongs to me. Pull the slack up on your jaw!"

Kate Burkey was off her big buckskin and on the ground. She had hold now of the halter rope of the big blue roan bronc. Her black eyes were shining, but some of the healthy tan color was gone from her face.

"Hide out at the rimrock cave behind the Shamrock ranch, Pete." Her voice was brittle. "I'll fetch you grub."

"You can't ride this roan bronc, Kate! You can't go—"

"Shut up, you sorrel-maned idiot! The buck's taken out of the blue roan. The HK dun will carry you from here to Mexico without turning a hair. You saved my life last night. I'm giving you a chance for your taw. Us Burkey's pay off our debts, good and bad."

Pete grinned flatly. "The sign reads like Horse Thief Burkey and his son Buster planted them stolen HK cattle in the rough pasture an' killed Mike Braddigan. I'd sooner be afoot than take a favor from one of your Burkey tribe!"

"Yonder they come, Pete, you freckle-faced bonehead! Git on this HK dun and git. I'll see you at the rimrock tonight. Wherever you go, I go with you. When I love a man I play for keeps!"

Kate Burkey's voice was choked now and her shining black eyes were pleading.

Pete Braddigan swung off the big blue roan and took her in his arms. His wiry stubble of dirty beard scratched her face as he kissed her.

Then she was on top of the big blue roan and headed off at an angle, letting the bronc hit a tired lope.

Pete Braddigan swung aboard the big, line-backed buckskin that was fresh, grain-

fed and hard and tough. This was a horse that could leave any posse behind.

Pete and Kate Burkey rode the same length stirrup. She had grabbed his mud-spattered hat and put it on, slamming her clean, buckskin-colored Stetson on his head. And as she rode off into a long coulee on that big blue roan bronc, she could have been easily mistaken for Pete Braddigan by a distant bunch of riders.

It was, Pete told himself, a hell of a thing for a man to let a girl do for him! But Kate Burkey had written out her own ticket and was gone. The only thing for him to do now was to play out the hand she had dealt him.

He gave the big line-backed dun its head and headed straight for the badlands, traveling at a long lope that ate up the miles and left that straggling posse far behind.

Then he slowed down to a trot and changed his course to throw them off on the wrong trail. His brain was clearing now, and he could gather his scattered thoughts and try to puzzle out some kind of answer to the thing.

But none of the pieces of the puzzle would fit into place.

Mike Braddigan had been murdered and a bunch of stolen HK cattle had been found in the Shamrock rough pasture. Yet Black Ben had helped Pete break jail, and the hard-bitten, stern-minded Captain Hank Kidd—owner of the stolen cattle—had given him a chance to make a get-away. Though the Captain had admitted he was betting a thousand dollars that his big Hell Broke Loose bronc would be ridden. And the Captain knew that Pete was the only man in Montana who would stand a chance of riding that outlaw.

Pete's thoughts went further back, to the several days and nights he had stayed at the Burkey ranch, lazing around, catching a mess of catfish and skinning them for Kate to cook. Talking Sioux and sign language to the fat Assiniboine squaw who was the only mother Kate Burkey had known since her own mother had died. And in the evenings sitting on the river bank, watching the moon rise and talking to Kate.

He never asked where her father and brother might be, because Horse Thief Burkey and his son Buster were always away on some kind of a shady deal. Pete didn't want to believe that Kate had kept him there at the ranch while her father and loud-mouthed brother threw those stolen cattle into the rough pasture. . . . And murdered Mike Braddigan.

There wasn't a hell of a lot of harm, when you came right down to facts, in Horse Thief Burkey. He'd been sent to the pen years ago for stealing horses, then pardoned out in order to make a living for his wife and two kids.

Horse Thief Burkey was lazy and shiftless. His fences were broken and never mended. He hadn't the gumption to cut and rake and stack the wild hay along the river. His log cabin and barn and sheds would never get chinked and daubed if it weren't for Kate, who did the ranch chores and most of the cooking and mending, still having time to practice trick riding and roping.

Kate made all her own clothes. She scolded and spoiled her Texan father and listened to his endless stories of that year and a half in the Deer Lodge Pen. She mothered her shiftless father, but for her big oversized brother, she had only contempt.

She could cuss like a cowhand, and when she turned loose on her brother Buster, she flayed him with all the cow-country terms of contempt she knew. Then she used up a few Mexican words she had picked up, polishing off the job in the Sioux language.

FLASH TO WESTERN FICTION FANS! Walt Coburn, King of Cowboy Writers, returns in the next issue with a big-caliber cow-country novel. . . . The smashing story of the Two Block outfit, condemned to destruction by a conniving, bloody-handed ramrod who makes his play against the loyalty of an old-time, fighting cow-hand! Read it in the September STAR WESTERN. Buy it August 11th!

HORSE THIEF BURKEY and Mike Braddigan had always been friends, and the two ranches joined each other on the north side of the Missouri River.

When they got together with a jug, their arguments would last far into the night. Horse Thief Burkey, small and wiry and black eyed and his voice that of a Texan, and Mike Braddigan, red-headed and getting gray, with a Dublin brogue he had inherited from his father. They swapped lies and quarreled and argued; always parting enemies, but meeting the next time with warm friendship.

No, there was no real harm in Horse Thief Burkey, for all his Texan threats. But there was harm in Buster and the cattle rustler company he kept along both sides of the Missouri River badlands. And because there was a yellow streak in Buster Burkey, he was the more dangerous.

If Kate Burkey had kept Pete Braddigan a few days and nights at the Seven Mile Ranch, in order to give her father and brother time enough to plant those stolen HK cattle, then she might be up to another cunning trick.

When it came right down to cases, Kate Burkey was as hard as steel. And this could be the bear trap to catch Pete Braddigan.

Horse Thief Burkey had the notion that the sun rose and set in the heart of that big braggart son of his. Shiftless, worthless, with a petty larceny soul, Horse Thief would kill a man who bothered his big overgrown son Buster.

Then there was Captain Hank Kidd and his ramrod Ross Platte. Captain Kidd wanted the Shamrock outfit, as well as the Burkey spread on Seven Mile. They said of Captain Hank Kidd that he was as cold-blooded as the pirate whom he claimed for an ancestor; ruthless and cruel. And that ramrod of his, Ross Platte, was a killer.

It took too much thinking for Pete Braddigan. He gave it up as a bad job, and headed the big line-backed dun into the badlands.

Kate Burkey had just the same as told him that she loved him— That she wanted to go with him, wherever he went. That bothered Pete, for he had no love in his heart for Kate Burkey.

He had known her since they were kids along the river. Taught her to ride and how to swim the Missouri, how to flag a bunch of antelope close, or to lie motionless for hours watching the timid whitetail deer come to water.

Pete had a way with animals. He never shot a deer, never trapped a wolf. He had taken Kate one time to the wild plum grove near the Larb Hills and they had hidden and watched a she-grizzly with three silver-tip grizzly cubs stripping the fruit from the plum tree branches, and the cubs wrestling and playing there in the open. Until the she bear caught their scent and they had to run like hell to get away alive. . . . Things like that. Kate Burkey, with her tomboy ways, had never been anything but a pardner. Now she was making it into something bigger and more serious. Her kiss still burned Pete's whiskered lips and it left him pretty much bewildered.

Because there was Dixie Kidd.

Black haired, smoky-eyed Dixie, whose red-lipped smile made a cowpuncher's heart turn cartwheels. Pete had heard Dixie yelling at him to ride. But she was Captain Hank Kidd's daughter, and a two-bit cowhand could have no chance there, even though that loud-mouthed Buster did claim he was on the inside track. And the quick-triggered Ross Platte was Dixie Kidd's escort at the dances.

Pete shook those puzzling problems off as he rode into the badlands and headed the HK dun for the Shamrock ranch. Twisting his way through the rough, broken hills, the fresh, clean smell of rain-washed scrub pines welcomed him home. And it was moonrise when Pete got to the ranch.

This was where a man on the dodge had better ride careful. Pete pulled up into the brush, watching the log buildings and pole corrals in the white moonlight. Waiting. His six-shooter gripped in his hand.

It happened too suddenly for Pete Braddigan to do anything about it. He saw the grave that held Old Man Mike Braddigan.

Then saw a a man riding a big, fat gray gelding. That was Horse Thief Burkey on the big gray he called Moss Agate, riding up to the unmarked grave of Mike Braddigan. He took off his hat

and bending forward across his saddle horn as if he were saying a prayer, though Pete couldn't imagine any sort of prayer in his tough Texan heart.

That happened in less than a minute. Then there was the loud, sharp crack of a saddle gun from somewhere in the night. Horse Thief Burkey's back stiffened, then went limp. The big iron gray gelding, broke to stand gunfire, never moved. Horse Thief Burkey doubled across his saddle horn and his right foot slid from the stirrup. Then his dead body slid down and toppled head foremost onto the ground. His hat was still gripped in his right hand as he lay there dead alongside the grave of Mike Braddigan.

It held Pete Braddigan stunned for a minute, like a nightmare thing that just can't happen. He shook his head suddenly, and spurred the big dun out into the open and across the clearing towards the place where he had sighted the short spurt of gun-flame. His gun was in his hand and his battered lips bared. Every nerve and muscle tensed.

He heard men shouting back and forth, the cracking of brush, the splashing of river water.

Pete pulled up at the water's edge. The six-shooter in his hand was roaring, jerking its recoil into his thick, freckled hand. But the river was black and wide, and the men who were swimming their horses across were not talking or shooting back.

The only sounds that came back from out there were the blowing and snorting of horses. Pete kept shooting at those sounds, hoping that he'd shoot a man and not a horse. He heard a man let out a groaning yelp of pain and knew that at least one of his borrowed bullets had hit a target. And when there were no more sounds, and the gun-echoes had died, Pete Braddigan rode slowly back.

Beside the grave that held his father lay Horse Thief Burkey, shot twice in the back and dead, his old hat still in his hand.

★

PETE BRADDIGAN dismounted. He pulled off his hat, the hat that belonged to Kate, and stood there for quite a while, bareheaded in the night.

One thing was certain—Horse Thief Burkey had not killed Mike Braddigan. He had ridden here tonight to pay his respects to a dead man. That cleared the Texican, and somehow, for Pete the manner of his passing had cleaned his slate of any careless sin.

Pete led his HK dun and the Moss Agate to the water trough. Then into the barn, where he unsaddled and fed them.

He moved slowly towards the tool shed and came out with a pick and shovel. There, in the moonlight, he dug a deep grave alongside Mike Braddigans' last resting place, taking the canvas tarp from his own round-up bed for Horse Thief Burkey's shroud. He was buckling the tarp about the body when he heard the thud of shod hoofs.

His gun slid into his hand and he dropped into the open grave he had dug for Horse Thief Burkey.

Then he recognized the lone rider. His vioce croaked hoarsely from the open grave.

"Step down, Kate. We've got a job. They killed your father. This is his grave."

Kate Burkey said nothing as she got off the big blue roan bronc and knelt beside her father. She was dry-eyed and quiet. Too quiet. Pete climbed out of the open grave and stood there, inarticulate, dirt-grimed and sweat-soaked from his grisly labor.

"Who," asked Kate Burkey in a quiet tone, "murdered him?"

"I don't know, pardner. There was more than one. I got one of 'em out in the river. Hit him where it hurt enough to make him yelp. What fetched you here, Kate?"

"My father. I told him I'd meet him here. Bring him enough money to take him out of the country, before they arrested him for the murder of Mike Braddigan. . . . "

Pete gripped her shoulders in his tough hands and held her like that. In the moonlight, his hard grey-green eyes looked straight into Kate Burkey's black ones.

"I saw your dad ride up here on ol' Moss Agate. Saw him take off his hat and lean for'ards acrost his saddle horn. Like he was talkin' to the grave that holds Old Man Mike. . . .

"Then they shot him in the back. Like they shot Mike Braddigan. And if you'll build a fire in the kitchen stove and brew us a pot of round-up coffee, Kate, I'll take care of these chores. And from here on me and you travel together."

But Kate Burkey was not making coffee then. She and Pete worked together there in the moonlight. Until another grave was dug and another man buried. Then they had coffee and biscuits and meat.

Pete Braddigan took a look through the log house. It was a mess. Beds slept in and left unmade. Cigarette butts and tobacco soiling the pine board floors that Pete had kept scrubbed. Broken whiskey bottles and tin cups thrown into corners. The log house that Pete Braddigan had kept as clean as a hound's tooth.

It was Kate who boiled out the coffeepot and got breakfast while Pete threw out empty bottles and swamped out and flung out blankets and soogans to get the cleansing of the morning sun.

There was the old battered checkerboard and deck of cards that Mike Braddigan and Horse Thief Burkey had used a thousand and one times. The checkerboard and checkers were grimed and worn. The deck of cards bore the marks and crimps of both men. Remnants, relics of a comradeship that only those two had understood.

Pete lifted a stove lid. He dropped the old checkerboard, the checkers, the old deck of cards, into the fire. Then he put the lid back. Pete's eyes were as hard and cold now as green ice. His grin had no mirth in it.

"They were two of a kind, Kate. Great men. Greater than any men in history. I'll get the murderers that killed 'em!"

Kate Burkey had never seen Pete Braddigan like this. His grin, flat-lipped and cruel, whiskers marring his square face and his clothes in rags. The laughter gone from his eyes.

"I go along, Pete, regardless. . . . When you get ready to go to Dixie Kidd, I won't have you hobbled or staked out on a picket line. But I'll do everything to keep you from making a fool of yourself over that millionaire gal of Captain Hank Kidd's. Because, pardner, she'd make you walk the plank just like her daddy, and you'd be wearing Dixie's sash for a blindfold. Coffee strong enough, you sorrel-maned bonehead?"

Dry-eyed, but a huskiness in her voice, Kate Burkey filled the coffee cups in the hard, gray dawn, slashed with streaks of red, like blood across a gray blanket.

Those two graves there, put hard, bitter grief in their hearts. Neither dared to say too much for fear of cracking that hard shell of their hatred.

★

THEY sipped their coffee and the grub they ate was like so much sawdust in their mouths. Pete rolled and lit a cigarette.

"Kate?" his voice was harsh.

"What is it, Pete?"

"When we locate a parson. . . . Will you marry me?"

"No. . . . No, Pete."

Their eyes met and whatever frankness was Kate's she had withdrawn behind that pair of black eyes, and a smile that matched Pete Braddigan's for hardness.

"I'll side you, Pete, fight back-to-back with you. But I won't marry any man who loves another woman. Get that straight. Now let's get away from here before we're trapped. Give me a gun. I'm going to kill the man that killed my father. We're pardners, Pete. Not lovers. Any kind of a gun that will shoot straight."

Pete poked into a flour bin and down into the bottom of it. He brought out a lumpy object in a tied salt sack and dropped it on the kitchen table.

"Might be that a little flour has sifted into the sack, Kate. But dust it off and it won't miss."

Kate Burkey jerked loose the string that tied the mouth of the salt sack. She pulled out a .38 gun and blew the faint coating of flour from it. Then wiped the gun clean with a dishrag.

"I kept it there," Pete told her, "for a sort of a hole-card."

He gave her a box of cartridges for the .38 and, she was shoving the shells into her pocket when Pete tackled her like a football player.

They crashed to the floor together as a .30-30 bullet shattered the windowpane and flattened itself into the log wall be-

yond. Pete Braddigan lay across the girl, holding her down, his short, thick frame protecting her as half a dozen more bullets snarled and whined through the door and broken window pane, not more than a couple of feet above them.

The shooting stopped as abruptly as it had started. Pete rolled free, his voice no more than a whisper: "Nice neighbors we got, pardner."

He slid a carbine from a shelf and crouched low under the window sill. He leveled it, lined the sights, then gently let down the hammer. But a second later, he shot twice, as fast as he could lever the second cartridge into the breech. A man who had been slipping away through the brush floundered around a few seconds then flattened out, becoming quiet. The saddle gun in his hand was flung aside.

"That," said Pete Braddigan flatly as he shoved cartridges into the carbine magazine "rids the cow country of a thing they call Clem Hobson."

Kate Burkey was crawling away from the window on her hands and knees. The bone-handled, long-barreled .38 gun was gripped in her hand.

Pete Braddigan's grin was flat. "A hell of a way," he said, "to treat a lady."

Kate was breathing hard and her red lipped mouth twisted.

"You knocked my wind out." She tried to grin. "Next time you wanta rassle, just tell me beforehand."

Pete motioned to her to lie low. His low voice cautioned her that this might be the stand off.

"Somebody," he explained, "don't like us much."

But Kate Burkey had seen Pete line his sights, and let down the carbine hammer without shooting. And through the bullet smashed window she had seen the man on horseback who had ridden away unhurt.

Kate's face was as white as alkali now, her voice no more than a whisper: "That was Buster you let get away."

"Keep out of the line of fire by this window," Pete evaded the question. "Crawl into that back room. No windows there. You might come in handy directly. You hold the water bucket and I'll do the shootin'."

Kate Burkey was a hard girl to lie to. "Pete, you'd better tell me."

"Buster didn't kill Mike Braddigan," said Pete. "He don't know your father is dead. Buster just got here. He rode a slow horse. But out yonder in the buckbrush is a fancy killer. His name is Ross Platte. He'll let you walk out with your hands in the air."

"I'll string my bets here, Pete," Kate Burkey said quietly.

Pete Braddigan told her to quit moving around, or they'd draw more gunfire. Kate lay flattened out on the floor with a gun in her hand and the color coming back into her tanned face.

"Brother Van," she said, her black eyes shining, "is the best bet I know for a parson."

CHAPTER FIVE

Death Breaks the Trail

THERE were about fifty men in the posse. Some of them were just grub-line riders, drifters, saloon hangers-on who would do anything for five dollars a day. They were a coyote pack that used whiskey to give them enough courage to obey the murder orders they took.

But there were other men there—hard-bitten renegades, hand-picked for their toughness and cunning. Scum of the notorious Outlaw Traid. They were the men with whom Mike Braddigan had become entangled. And they were bushed up out there with their guns to do some killing.

Across the river, cattle were adwling. Pete crawled across the floor to where Kate Burkey sat. A steel-jacket bullet had cut a thin rip across Pete's husky shoulders. The cold sweat of pain beaded his forehead and whiskered face.

"Buster pulled out," he told her. "They shot at his back when he quit the flats. Might be that your loud-mouthed brother is havin' a change of mind."

"Are you tryin' to make me happy, Pete?"

"No, ma'am. Tellin' the truth. . . . Dammit, *lay flat!*"

Bullets came through the shattered window and through the door. Some of those bullets hit the stove, and the snarling whine of their ricochet burned into their

ears like the close sting of a hornet. There were some big old crockery cups and plates on a shelf and the bullets splintered them. Now and then a bullet crashed into the tin dishes or the skillets hanging on the wall.

Kate Burkey was cussing like a cowhand as she ripped off Pete's tattered shirt and poured some of old Mike Braddigan's whiskey into the bullet rip, then finished the job with a crude dressing and bandage. While Pete grunted and cussed silently through gritted teeth and told her she was slower than molasses on a blizzard day in January.

Pete didn't try to stop her when she found another carbine and took her stand at a place where she had hacked out the chinking between the logs. They moved from one wall to another, for from each of those four sides the attack came. A deadly hail of hot lead, from saddle-guns, rifles and six-shooters out in the brush thickets.

The sun rose and dragged itself slowly across the badlands sky. The water in the cabin was getting low. Pete Braddigan had two bullet rips now, and Kate Burkey had been nicked in the leg. Out in the brush Ross Platte barked orders for his killers to close in. It was in the first gray shadows of dusk, Pete and Kate Burkey heard the brassy voice of Buster Burkey, just as loud and blatant as it had sounded in the arena.

"Don't let a mother's son of 'em git away, Captain!"

"Keep your worries to yourself. Ben, you black rascal, keep up!"

"How kin a man keep up wif a mule that throwed a shoe?"

"Git off and tack a shoe on 'im and ketch up. And, dammit, don't drop your gun in the mud!"

Then in they came like the charge of the Light Brigade, spurring their horses, making more noise than the battle of Gettysburg. A loud-mouthed cowboy yelling and sobbing. A big Negro whose heart had no fear but was filled with loyalty. A tall, stiff-backed man who held his gunfire. Three men discarding the odds and gambling away their lives.

"Buster!" Kate Burkey's voice was a dry sob.

Pete Braddigan let out a wild cowboy yell. "You Buster! You Ben! Cap'n Kidd!"

Pete's voice was a hoarse yell. He threw Kate Burkey behind him and kicked open the front door, then slammed it shut. He ran, bowlegged, across that gunfire, with bullets whining and snarling across his ears.

He saw Buster Burkey ride square into the middle of a hail of bullets that tore him from his saddle. He saw Ben, on a lame mule kill three men in their tracks, his teeth ivory white. And he caught a short glimpse of the tall, gaunt, white mustached Captain Hank Kidd as that land-pirate cowman rode shouting into battle.

"Walk the plank, you scrapings of Satan's kettle!"

He never pulled up the slack of his bridle reins, and every shot hitting its mark. He saw Buster Burkey go out of his saddle and Ben kill the two men who had taken their cowardly brush shots at Buster.

Pete headed for the barn, escaping a hail of bullets. He ducked into the barn and charged out on the big blue roan, Hell Broke Loose.

"Git at' em!" he yelled.

Pete jerked loose the string that held the saddle rope. Then he had his loop built and came on a run. A bullet whined and the thud of it jerked the rope out of his right hand.

Pete changed his mind about roping the man who had killed his father. His gun was in his hand and there was a wide, flat grin on his muddy, blood-spattered face. His right hand was dangling but his left hand gripped a gun.

★

THERE was one man in the shadows who was really playing for keeps. One man whose gun was spitting flame—shooting to kill, but his luck had spoiled. It was Ross Platte playing his string out.

Either a man lives or he dies. And you can die only once.

Ross Platte loomed up in the buckbrush the fraction of a second. Big, handsome and as tough as a boot. Then the two men were shooting at one another and shoot-

ing to hit. The big blue roan piled up, somersaulting in a blaze of guns.

The big blue roan bronc named Hell Broke Loose was standing there, blowing hard, blood on his front hoofs, his eyes wicked.

Suddenly the shooting was over. Captain Hank Kidd and Ben were carrying the dead body of Buster Burkey out of the brush.

"Seems like Buster had a change of mind," said Captain Hank Kidd. "He sighted you an' Kate in the cabin and quit his bad company to fetch us here to help. How you doin' for yourself, Pete Braddigan?"

"Fair to middlin', sir. Ross Platte was gamblin' for the Shamrock outfit and the Burkey ranch. He was the gent that worked the HK brands into the Shamrock iron and killed my dad and Horse Thief Burkey. He got away from me once when he crossed the river. Now he got caught in his own bushwhacker trap. Too bad he couldn't have done it before!"

Pete Braddigan saw the gray color of Captain Hank Kidd's face; the seared look in the tall cowman's eyes.

"Dixie," said Captain Hank Kidd, "is dead. That team of hers ran away at the contest grounds and turned the buckboard over. I'd like for you and Kate to come on to the ranch with me, Pete. A man needs his friends. I got nobody left now. I never swore out a warrant for you, Pete. Ross Platte did that. I'd given him a mighty free hand as ramrod. Trusted him a heap too far."

Nobody on earth had ever heard that note of pleading in the voice of Captain Hank Kidd, and it confused Pete Braddigan. Then Kate Burkey walked over to the tall rancher and her arms went up and around his neck. She was mothering him like he was a youngster with a broken toy.

And the stiff-backed cowman was holding Kate Burkey in his arms, the bleakness gone from his eyes. This daughter of Horse Thief Burkey was giving Captain Hank Kidd more than ever the cowman had gotten from his own daughter.

It was something to pinch a man's heart. Pete Braddigan turned away. He was wrapping a tarp around the dead body of Buster Burkey when he heard the soft, deep-throated voice of Captain Hank Kidd calling his name.

"That thousand dollars I won on your bronc-ride, Pete, will take you and Kate to Niagara Falls on a wedding trip. Brother Van is due in about a week. You'll be married at the HK ranch. Then you'll come back to an old land pirate, who needs you both."

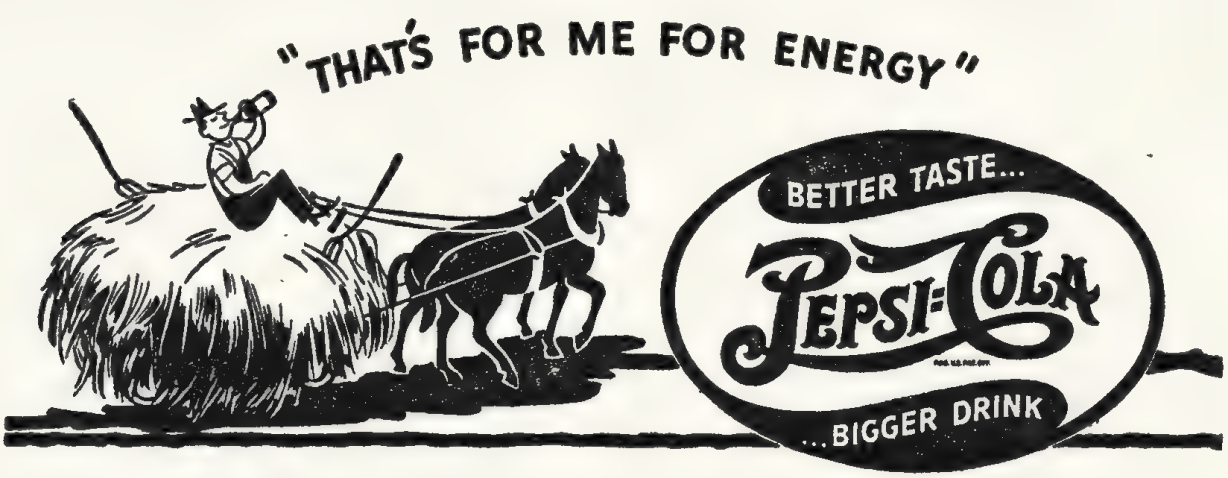
Captain Hank Kidd brushed the back of a hand across his eyes that were filmed under brushy eyebrows. His voice sharpened:

"Ben! You black rascal! Git that coffee boilin'!"

Black Ben shoved his six-shooter into the waistband of his faded overalls. His teeth showed like white piano keys.

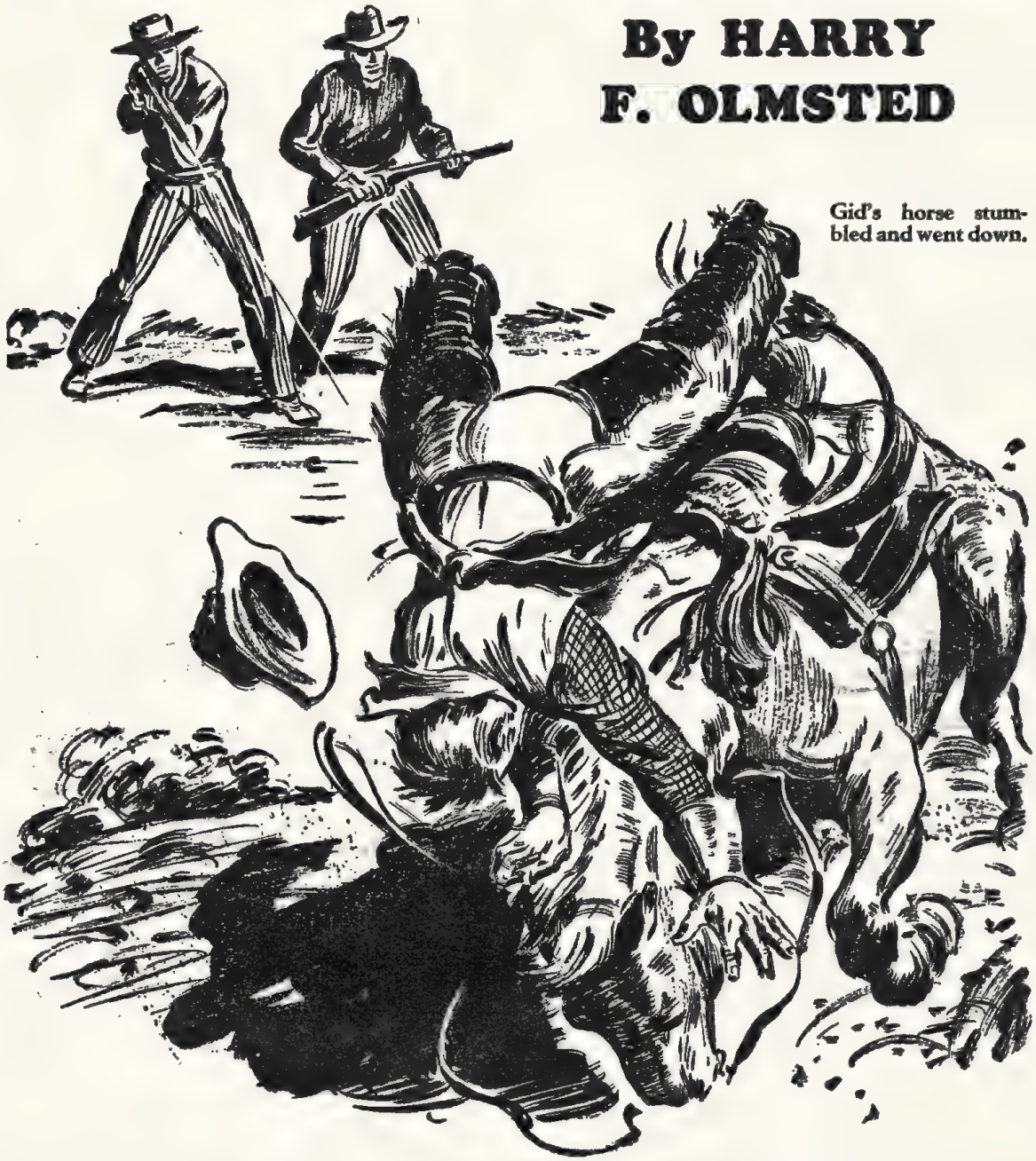
"Cap'n Kidd, the Pirate!" he chuckled as he went about his peaceful chores.

THE END



HOSS GREER'S HALF

By HARRY F. OLMSTED



Gid's horse stumbled and went down.

It looked to Hoss Greer's rancher friends as if Buford Lutley was a summer-time Santa Claus, who'd make every poverty cowman a millionaire with his new-found black gold. But Hoss was too old to believe in that kind of Santa—though his skepticism won him the enmity of every honest rancher in Arizona!

CHAPTER ONE

Black Gold!

THE friends of Old Hoss Greer—and they were legion—were drawn to him by all manner of urges. Some were proud to bask in the reflected light of his venerable reputation. Some hoped vainly to be called upon to side him in one of his perennial gun-slinging adventures. Some were just plain selfish—

INTEREST IN HELL

A Smashing Oil-Boom Novel

feeling a degree of security in his presence, and playing heavily upon the old timer's loyalty to a friend in need. And then there was Doc Petersmith.

Throckmorton X. Petersmith, once of the blueblood Petersmiths of Back Bay Boston but currently the owner of the Double Circle Ranch, adjoining Hoss' Tres Alamos spread on the southeast, was Hoss' friend because he liked him. And it was mutual. Neither man had any other underlying motive for being friends, no apologies.

Petersmith was a grinning, unabashed tenderfoot looking for information and learning when he came to see Hoss. The old timer liked him at once, nor could he have told why except that there was a ring

of honesty about him. Shame-facedly, Petersmith confessed that the X stood for Xerxes—a name he couldn't abide, one he had never forgiven his parents for inflicting upon him. This so nearly paralleled Hoss' own Hostetter handle as to forge an instant bond of sympathy between them. This ripened into full-fledged friendship, with Hoss taking command of the tenderfoot's education.

After a year, Hoss rated Doc—the nickname of Throckmorton X.—high on his list of friends. He took keen pleasure in schooling this eager, friendly little man.

Misunderstanding had its roots in the ride Hoss and Doc took to Borego Swale, a weird folding of the earth along the toe of the Mangas Hills, and adjoining both their holdings. It was early fall and Hoss desired to locate cattle, before the impending round-up. The horses were suffering from the heat and Hoss reined over to Rattlesnake Springs—where a scientist had discovered fossils and established a camp one summer. Here the soil was ashy and things grew poorly. It was a place of mystery.

The springs poured out abundant sweet water and Hoss had worked up a vast thirst, bragging about its healthful properties. But when they reached the pond below the springs and dismounted, the thirsty animals only snorted, pawed and shook their muzzles to clear the water surface.

"Now what the hell ails them fuzztails?" mused Hoss.

Doc Petersmith sniffed. "My word," he exclaimed. "I smell coal oil."

"Coal oil? You're crazy." But Hoss had spotted the peacock scum on the water, scowled and wet his index finger to smell and taste the stuff. A queer look blanked his face. It was oil all right, not coal oil but stuff like they used to lay dust on Phoenix streets. "What the hell?" he muttered. "Somebody takin' out his spite on me by foulin' the best cattle water in this scope of range. I'd like to line my sights on the critter."

Doc let his glance rove the barren ash ridges, his lips parted, his breath rough and uneven. "No, Hoss, I think you're wrong. This is an oil formation. Looks exactly like a couple of oil developments I've seen. Who owns this land?"

"Uncle Sam. Why? You suggestin' there's oil under here?"

"Why not?" Doc's eyes glistened. "What a break for you, my friend. You've bucked the frontier, fought Indians, outlaws and rustlers. You've pioneered, making your money the hard way. Now you will make some easy money, some big money, so easy you won't believe it."

He rattled on about black gold under the earth, of poor men made millionaires overnight, of leases on worthless land commanding the ransom of a king. Just for the right to drill, nothing else. Hoss felt an excitement utterly new to him. Money, to him, had been only a medium of exchange. Wealth he had measured in cattle, in grass and water and the trust of his friends.

"To hell with millions," he muttered. "An' to oil outfits foulin' water an' grass an' chousin' my beefs. If some varmint ain't fouled this spring, Doc, how you figger this oil ain't showed up before this?"

Doc explained about oil strata breaking into water seeps and so finding its way to springs, lakes and seas. Then he mildly criticized Hoss' attitude regarding wealth, insisting money was all Arizona needed to rate another star on the Flag. To this last, Hoss wasn't listening. Excitement was growing in him. "Oil," he murmured. "Cripes, you realize nobody knows of this but you an' me, son? What we gonna do?"

"First," said Doc, "we lease the land from the government. Then we incorporate, capitalize, hire a driller and let nature take its course. I'll go to Phoenix tomorrow. Friend," he cuffed Hoss on the shoulder good-naturedly, "the money is going to roll in on us. Fast—and big!"

Hoss believed him, and was caught in a swirling current of desire.

★

FOUR days later Doc Petersmith returned from Phoenix with little of his early enthusiasm, yet without pessimism. "We are too late, Hoss. The land is leased."

Hoss glared at him. "Leased? By hell nobody's gonna lease our grass an' water right out from under us. They can't do that to us!"

"They have, Hoss. Man named Buford Lutley. I met him at the Commercial Hotel. Nice fellow. Long as it has to be someone else, I'm glad it's him."

"Damned outsider," growled Hoss, jealously. "Buford Lutley? Never heard of him. How come him to find that scum on Rattlesnake Springs?"

Doc smiled at his puzzlement. "Lutley had a lot of luck, Hoss. He's what they call a geologist. While scouting soapstone ridges beyond Enterprise, he dropped into the Toh-tla-chee trading post. An Apache, buying coal oil and complaining about the price, threatened to skim his own oil off a spring he knew. Lutley paid the Indian to show him. That's what I call a piece of pure luck."

"What now?" asked Hoss.

"Lutley starts drilling soon as his portable outfit gets here. But the best news is that he's inviting local people to participate."

"Such as how?"

"He's formed a trusteeship and will sell shares to finance drilling. Fresh from Cutbank Field, Texas, he says shareholders there took out a thousand for one. So our bad luck becomes good luck. Lutley's calling a meeting at Cherry Hill schoolhouse for next Friday night."

It left Hoss cold. Riches, like carrion, attracted buzzards. Why should Lutley share his discovery when the banks were going oil crazy? It smelled like using other men's money to gamble, sharing none of the losses and most of the profits. Hoss' prejudice was not lessened when he met the man, at the schoolhouse.

Lutley was big and pompous, with cropped mustache and sagging jowls. His eyes were shifty as he caught Hoss' glance, when the cowman entered. Hoss liked him then less than ever. At Doc's introduction, Lutley boomed "Delighted to meetcha, Mister Greer," and stuck out his hand.

Hoss winced, stood back, massaging his injured fingers, scowling blackly. "Any feller," he growled, "who'll smash a man's hand in friendly shake will smash hell out of him if he gets him in a money squeeze."

Lutley flushed. "You're wrong about me, my friend. As wrong as a man can be who shakes hands like a dead fish and lets his friends down in a pinch."

Hoss turned to fire and flame. "Meanin' I'd let my friends down, Lutley?"

"No more than you mean I'd swindle my associates, Greer."

They glared for an awkward minute. The Widder Snodgrass, forthright cowwoman whose outfit hugged the Mazatzals, spoke up. "Quit pawin' dirt an' bellerin', you two. I can hear enough grousin' from discontented cowhands without ridin' here to get more of it. Le's get down to business."

Tom and Eph Santell, brothers who ran the Housetop S, north of the Apache Hills, grabbed Hoss' arm. "Don't ruckus with him, Hoss," begged Eph. "If he's willin' to have us make money along with him, why rub his fur the wrong way?"

"To fetch out the skunk oil so you pilgrims can smell it," growled Hoss, but he finally heeded the combined pleas of a group including Torvo Tillotson, of the Anchor Bar; whiskered and taciturn Ben Bardin, who had fought through the Tonto War; Circle Box's Tim Mears,

NEW SUCCESS OVER ATHLETE'S FOOT

NEW SCIENTIFIC 2-WAY TREATMENT WITH **QUINSANA** POWDER -ON FEET AND IN SHOES – IS PRODUCING AMAZING RESULTS. IN TESTS ON THOUSANDS OF PERSONS, PRACTICALLY ALL CASES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT CLEARED UP IN A SHORT TIME.

who had ridden with Crook against Geronimo; and Bill Dunkirk, once ramrod and now owner of the Lightning T, thanks to Hoss' generosity.

Hoss retired to a rear seat, lit a cigarette and glowered as Doc Petersmith introduced Lutley as the speaker. The man spoke at length, telling how he had found the oil seep and of filing on four thousand acres of choice summer range. He explained dividing the holding into a hundred forty-acre allotments, reserving fifty-one for himself, making forty-nine available to the cowmen—each to be drawn by lot at one thousand dollars. The trusteeship provided that each shareholder shared equally in the profits of the discovery well.

Hoss watched excitement grip the listeners, fuming silently as the cowfolks drew allotments from a box, signed checks and nogotiable liens against their outfits. Widder Snodgrass took four, the Santells six. Tillotson and Mears took five each. Ben Bardin and Doc Petersmith bought ten each. Even Bill Dunkirk, still owing Hoss for the Lightning T, took two allotments. In ten minutes they subscribed a forty-two thousand dollar drilling fund.

"Hoss," called Doc Petersmith, "we'd like to have you with us in this."

Hoss smiled icily. "Not till I learn more about this Lutley jasper. A week is small time to check up. I'll let you know then."

Lutley snorted. "The seven allotments left will go fast. In a week all you'll get is the smell of oil, Greer. I'm real sorry for you."

"When a man starts feelin' sorry for another," snapped Hoss, "he's fixin' to git himself throwed as high as the twister who feels sorry for a pitchin' bronc. Good night to you all."

They rushed after him as he started out, those long-time friends. He brushed them off and he deafened himself to their pleas. "Do as you please," he barked. "An' let me do the same. I want none of it until I look up this gent that's sellin' us what is already ours."

"You stubborn old badger," ranted Torvo Tillotson. "You're a hot headed old fool, too dumb to pound sand in a rathole."

"Shut up, Torvo!" rapped Eph Santell. "Listen to me, Hoss. I never thought I'd see the day when you'd turn on your friends thisaway."

"Don't come none of that, none of you." Hoss whirled in the doorway, for one last dig. "Trouble with all of you is that you don't know the meanin' of friendship. The day will come when you'll admit, each of you, that my stayin' out was the way of a friend—if you'd only had sense to see it. Oily dreams, boys."

"Let him go," cried the Widder Snodgrass. "When Hoss Greer gets like that, you might as well give up. I got a long ride to make yet tonight. See you boys when they get the derrick built."

Hoss slammed the door behind him and strode to his waiting horse. He was about as mad as he had ever been, and not so much at the friends who had fallen away from him as at himself. Way down deep, was still a feeling that he had let his prejudice cheat him of something to which he was entitled.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead-Man Proof

HAVING committed himself to resistance, Hoss went all out. Instead of riding back to Tres Alamos, he turned his pony toward Phoenix, arriving there the following afternoon after changing horses at his Coyote Tanks ranch. With his usual tenacity he exhausted every possible source where he might be able to justify his suspicion of Buford Lutley . . . and failed.

At the capitol building he learned that Lutley had complied with all the legal requirements and was considered to be a sound operator. At the Stockman's National Bank, he was told that Lutley had presented the most satisfactory references, had deposited a comfortable sum and had established a tidy credit by appearing personally before the directors and presenting a thumbnail sketch of his plans for putting the territory into the swim of oil prosperity.

Baffled, Hoss spent half a day on a bench, in the park before the city hall, eating crow and suffering as he always did, when the tides of fortune ran strong-

ly against him. As he studied, the words *Cutbank Field* kept running through his mind. *Cutbank Field.* Over and over—*Cutbank Field.* And then he remembered Little Gid Oswald.

Little Gid had worked on half a dozen of Hoss's many and far-flung cow outfits. Small boned, weak-muscled, his had been an enthusiasm for cowboying that had carried him far beyond his natural talents—and yet not far enough. With his saddle-pard—big Gid Watkinson, he had given everything he had for Old Hoss, yet his friends were first to admit that he would never become a cowboy. Nobody had ever tried harder and wasted more loops.

When Big Gid was killed trying to save the cowcamp cook, when the hoodlum wagon overturned in the flooded Salt River, Little Gid was inconsolable. Only then did Hoss realize what an encouragement Big Gid had been to the little feller. Little Gid drew his time, declaring his intention to visit his people, who lived just out of Cutbank, Texas. And Hoss advised him to get into something other than cows. Later he had a letter from Little Gid, telling of the oil boom near Cutbank and enthusing about the good job he had with the Marglobe Oil Company.

Suddenly Little Gid assumed man-size proportions to Old Hoss. Little Gid would know. Hoss hurried over to the telegraph office and sent a wire.

★

LITTLE GID came back to the Territory with his old-time enthusiasm and a great big grin for all the boys who had been patient with his blundering efforts to make himself a cowhand. He had made good money in the oil business and he had saved it. This, he told them, was his long delayed vacation and he had outfitted himself with new range duds. He looked like a cowboy fashion plate and the boys hoorawed him plenty. But Old Hoss whisked him out of the bunkhouse in a hurry and told him of Buford Lutley and the threatened oil boom.

"Buford Lutley!" Little Gid's pinched face wrinkled and a faraway look came into his eyes. "Big, loud-mouthed hombre, wearin' cowboy boots that hurt his feet so he hippers along instead of walkin'?"

"That's him."

"Cropped mustache, Stetson hat big as a wagon tarp an' eyes that won't stand hitched?"

"You're sure peggin' him, son."

"That," said Little Gird, "will likely be the feller we knowed as Bartee Langhorn—as rotten an aig as ever went spoiled. First he dabbled in leases, in an' around Cutbank. Then he organized trusteeships, namin' his own trustee who always run out with the money, leavin' the share holders with nothin' but some lousy little woreout drillin' rig an' some hardscrabble tools."

"Never brought in no oil?"

"Never intended to. Put up a cheap derrick, or spudded in with a lousy portable rig an' went through a few motions while raisin' money. When there was enough in the treasury, he made off with it, through some hireling. Cutbank folks run him out of town on a rail, after tarrin' an' featherin' him. That was a couple months ago, or a little bit more."

"About the time he showed up in Phoenix," said Hoss, beginning to feel better about the whole business. "What you think about that oil appearin' suddenly on Rattlesnake Springs, Gid?"

"Could be a plant, Hoss. I'd have to see it. Has he spudded in yet?"

"Dunno. I haven't been up since that first day with Doc Petersmith. An', seein' I'm poison to my old friends, I ain't heard a thing."

"We better go up and take a look."

They rode into the hills, Hoss and Little Gid. And from the low rise that forms the southwest border of the Swale, they saw the monuments Buford Lutley had erected to the hope of oil prosperity for Arizona. Higher up and several hundred feet distant from the pond below the spring, a line of seven cheap cabins had been thrown together. Some distance back, a knot of men toiled around the mast of a portable drilling outfit. The hills gave back the coughing echoes of a gasoline engine exhaust.

Little Gid took it all in, studiously.

"Same pattern," he said, finally. "He never changes it an iota. That's a junk-

heap Star rig. I don't even need to look at the wore-down bits an' rusty, spliced cable to know he couldn't drill a thousand feet with it to save his life. Whole setup didn't stand him a thousand dollars over the cost of rollin' it in here. How much has he raised here, an' how?"

Hoss told him, and when Gid whistled incredulously: "Way them danged fools acted, Gid, they deserve to be sheered like lambs. Teach 'em a good lesson. But I can't let 'em be took by a crook like Lutley. An' yet what can I do?"

Gid shook his head. "That's a sticker, Hoss. Just a question if it's seemly for a feller to stick his beak in other fools' business."

"Them politicians in Phoenix vouch for him," mused Hoss. "The bank says he's solid as a rock. My friends all think I'm a hot-headed, cantankerous, meddlesome ol' bigot who's persecutin' God's gift to get-rich-quick cow people. Ain't nobody would believe me if I'd lay proof of Lutley's crookedness in his lap."

"Depends on the proof," said Little Gid, and his eyes were on the pond. "You never noticed any oil down there before, eh?"

"There never was; I'll swear to it. I've drunk outa that pond, watered my stock an' shot ducks on it—for thirty year. You think I wouldn't notice that sickenin' stuff?"

"Know you would. Me too, when we pitched round-up camp here, three year ago. This ain't the first time Langhorn's salted a pond. An' when he salts 'em, he don't figger to have the wind blow a pourin' to the muddy bank, where the ground holds it. He buries a dead-man."

"What's a dead-man?"

"Little ten gallon drum of light crude, with a hole knocked in the top. Water presses the oil out, little by little, an' keeps some on the surface despite the wind. . . ."

Anger flared in Old Hoss. "You reckon that skunk's got one of them do-flickers buried there now?"

"That would be my guess."

"Come on!" Hoss jabbed home the spurs. "We're locatin' that dead-man. Then I'm bringin' them pore sheeps out here, convincin' 'em they're playin' with a snake, an' soakin' up a heap of satisfaction while they run Mister Buford Lutley across the everlastin' hills."

"Wait!" yelled Little Gid, but Hoss was already flashing toward the pond, his pony running. There was nothing for Gid to do but follow along. As they rode, they saw the group at the rig split and scatter. Two men came running down toward the pond. The rifles they carried were glistening in the sunlight.

CHAPTER THREE

Rattlesnake Springs Runs Red

OLD HOSS GREER hit the border of Rattlesnake Springs at a dead run, circling the pond, his keen old eyes stabbing here, stabbing there, looking for the sign that would reveal the presence of the thing he sought—the hidden, planted source of the oil that even now lay like a scum on the smooth water surface.

The two gunmen tearing down from the rig had split around the pond. They came with a rush, big black-browed fellows wearing striped woolen pants, black sateen shirts and flat-heeled shoes. Alien to the range, these two, yet they had their counterpart here. The brand of their calling had been deeply burned for all to see.

The one who came around in front of Hoss brandished his rifle and waved the two horsemen back. The lash of his booming, enraged voice cut into the old cowman like the rasp of a file. "Get away from these springs, you wall-eyed buzzards. Can't you read that sign? If not, I'll read it for yuh. It says: KEEP OUT—NO TRESPASSING. An' don't get the idea that it don't include you."

Hoss reined in and the softness of his voice would have been a warning to anyone who knew him. "I don't give a good hot damn what it says or who it's meant to keep out. I located this water in '81 an' I've spent twenty-five year tryin' to prove that it's open to every honest cow outfit in this scope of country. It won't take me twenty-five seconds to prove that you or no other saloon-scourin's like you can foul the hole an' keep my cattle from drinkin'. . . ."

"Take 'er easy, Hoss," murmured

Little Gid, who had come up behind him. "No gun play till I've had time to look this layout over."

The second gunman came swinging up now, to stand beside the first, heaving for spent breath, his rifle cocked and level. His ebon, pin-point eyes clashed with Hoss's chill gray ones. "You cow fellers," he sneered, "think you own the whole of creation. Facts is, you ain't got an iota of right to this land or this water under any law on the face of the earth."

"Except the law of Ol' Judge Colt," snapped Hoss. "Which same I'll invoke for one plugged *centavo,* or less, any time you think you can make me take orders from a measly, crooked bunch of sucker baiters like you. It's come to a sweet pass when a man is run offa his own outfit for

WHILE HITLER LAUGHS!

"They machine-gunned the boats after our tanker sunk. . . . I came up in a sea of blazing oil; my lungs were bursting, but I managed to make it underwater to a clear place. . . . I tried to reach the bos'n, but he went down. . . ." That's when you want to top that 10% quota, and—BUY *MORE* U. S. WAR-SAVINGS BONDS!

tryin' to protect the interests of his neighbors. Gid, while I'm wau-wauin' these polecats, you sashay along the shore an' see can you locate that dead-man."

"Dead-man?" The gunmen looked at one another, appearing flabbergasted. The brutal jawed one scoffed. "Dead-man, hell! There's a line drawed between us, you fools. Man that crosses it starts a war."

Old Hoss gave a joyful whoop. "That means the dead-man's buried somewhere beyond them two, Gid. Go on an' look for it. I'll cover you. If they start the war I'll finish it."

"Mebby we better sorta use discretion. . . ." began Gid, but Hoss cut him off.

"Go on, damn it! Do like I tell yuh. If we let 'em bluff us out, they got us everlastin'ly where they want us. Go ahead, Gid!" His spurs tickled his mount and he advanced slowly.

Gid, convinced of Hoss' intent to see this through, edged his pony around that of the old cowman. As he crossed that imaginary line, a shot cracked flatly acrosss the Swale and smoke jutted from the muzzle of a rifle, in the hands of the uglier of the two guards.

Gid's horse stumbled and went down, sending its rider headlong to the earth. After that, the powder of conflict caught fire from that single shot and the hills gave back the echoes of volleying shots. Gid rolled and came to his knees and his draw was a pretty thing to see. Hoss' horse pitched but the cowman was rooted to the saddle and his gun was in his hand and he was shooting with all the merciless deadliness that was his when his rights were transgressed.

The two oil-well guards cried madly and one went down and the other dropped his weapon. Guns were silent as suddenly as they had raised their clamor. Gid was on his feet with a smoking gun in his hand. Hoss had brought his pony under control and his eyes smoldered. One of the guards lay dead upon the ground and the other whimpered over a smashed gun arm.

Hoss had small interest and he saw little of what lay before him. His cold gaze was turned toward the well, where the crew—four men, came at a run, their guns swinging. Two rods in front of those four, his long legs putting the distance behind him as he circled the pond, came Buford Lutley—aflame with fury.

"By God, Greer!" he roared, "you've started something here you'll regret as long as you live."

And Hoss answered, his voice rolling clearly across the water: "Stand back, Lutley! My interests in this swale go back to a day when you were kicking slats out of your cradle. You've planted oil on this pond an' when I find it, I'm running you out of this country so fast you'll burn them tight boots plum off your feet."

A hundred feet away, Lutley came to an

abrupt halt. "You're a liar, Greer!" he raged, impotently. "And I'll brand you for what you are—a selfish range hog—before the people who have mistakenly called you friend. I'll break you, Greer."

"Try it," replied Hoss, strangely quiet. "I see you and the coyotes you travel with. I've seen your like a hundred times before an' I know you like a book. You're the scourings of hell an' gutless as rabbits when the chips are down. I ain't easy bluffed, as you'll find out." He stepped out of the saddle. "Now, Gid, give a look-see an' ferret out that lousy dead-man."

Little Gid was rising to the saddle when Lutley gave a yell, whirled and called upon his approaching men to shoot it out. After that hell broke loose. Lutley's hirelings knelt and commenced shooting. Bullets whizzed all around Hoss and Gid. Gid spurred along the pond border, intent upon carrying out Hoss' order. Hoss lined his pistol with great deliberateness, but the range was long and he was matching short-gun fire against rifles—never a safe bet. He called to Gid.

"This is gettin' too hot. Gotta get outa here, Gid. But we'll be back. . . ."

Gid spun his mount, came with a rush, his hand outstretched. Lithely as a youth, Hoss caught that hand and vaulted up behind. Bent low and feeding steel to the struggling horse, they fogged it from there in a rain of bullets. And, behind them, Buford Lutley bellowed hungrily for his men to drop the running horse.

★

WEARIED by the day's hectic events, smarting under what he considered the lash of defeat, Hoss sat in his big living room that night, brooding and toying with the long drink Hung Soon, his Oriental cook, had mixed for him. Gid had left for the Mangus ridge, where Gil Pastime and the boys were building a long drift fence. With the certainty that tomorrow would bring a showdown, gunsmoke and death to men of both factions, Hoss was worrying about the loss of boys he always thought of first. There was a good reason why Hoss undertook his gun work so often alone.

Hoss heard the horseman come galloping into the yard just as Hung Soon announced that there were visitors. The visitors turned out to be one man. And, most surprising to Hoss, that man was Buford Lutley. He came into the room, a big arrogant man whose confidence remained unshaken by whatever adversities he had suffered.

Lutley was grinning expansively. He tossed his hat onto the table and came with long strides, his big hand outstretched. "Howdy, Mister Greer. I reckon you're surprised to see me, eh? Well, you'll understand when you know me better. I come in shame, after what happened at the Spring today. You know how it is with a man's temper. I lost my head and I suppose you did too. . . ."

"I never lose my head," said Hoss, coldly, and he ignored the man's proffered hand. "What do you want here?"

Shadows of annoyance crossed Buford Lutley's broad face, but he held his temper under close check rein, sat down and assumed an air of piety.

"I have two things on my mind, Mister Greer. First, Johnny Bark, one of my men, lies dead at the camp."

"Good riddance."

"He died thinking he was protecting me and my interests. You must at least honor him for that."

"I honor his kind for no known reason, Lutley."

"Very well. But that is not the question. Bark is dead and the law is interested in how and why he died."

"Tell them," snapped Hoss.

"That will involve you in a murder case, Mister Greer. I am here on a friendly mission. I have no desire to embarrass you. Now . . . er . . . if you and I could come to see eye to eye about certain things, Johnny Bark could turn up missing and no one would be the wiser."

"What do you mean—see eye to eye?"

"You're in business for money, Mister Greer—we all are. I want to see you with us, all making money out of something you have an inherent interest in. That is why I haven't sold those remaining seven allotments, though I have had a dozen opportunities to dispose of them at a hundred percent premium. I want you to have those shares. Come in with us; forget your opposition and reserve

judgment until we've made an honest attempt to bring in the oil. Do that and you can have those seven shares for four thousand dollars—little more than half price."

Hoss's lips curled. "Lutley," he said, too softly, "you're a scurvier snake than I thought. You're a crook and a stink in my nostrils. I wouldn't put five cents into your swindle if I knowed there was a million dollars in oil beneath Rattlesnake Springs, which there ain't a penny's worth. Your smooth blackmail don't win you no marbles, feller. Now get outa here, before I boot yuh out."

Sorrow rather than anger was mirrored on Lutley's broad face. "I'm sorry for you, Greer. I've tried to play square. I've kept my word and tried to give the local people first chance in the wealth under their feet. All have responded, most enthusiastically, except you. I have gone out of my way to cut you in, to save you the embarrassment of court business, defending yourself against a murder charge. You slap me in the face. . . ."

"I haven't," snapped Hoss, "but I damn' sure will if you don't get out. An' I mean far out—so far I'll never hear your name again. This range is too small for me an' you, Lutley, an' I'm figgerin' to stay a long time. It's your move, but before you leave for a fresh round-up of suckers, put the money you've collected in the Alamo State Bank, with a memorandum of what goes back to each man. If you try to run out on the friends you have turned against me, I'll follow and kill you."

"And that," said Buford Lutley, "will be repeated to the court, when you go on trial for your life. Good night to you."

He slammed the door behind him and Old Hoss chewed his mustache as he listened to the hoofbeats recede up the trail. "I'd save a lot of trouble all around," he muttered fiercely, "if I killed him now, the son. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Can Wait!

NEXT morning, Hoss left the ranch before dawn, instructing Hung Soon to send Gil and the boys to town as soon as they arrived—with their belt-loops full and their guns loose in their leathers. Hoss reached Doc Petersmith's ranch at sun-up, got Doc out of bed and invited himself for breakfast. Doc was cool, grumpy but fully observant of the etiquette of range hospitality.

"Doc," Hoss said, when they were tying into their cakes and coffee, "I've been a-thinkin' a lot about our differences of opinion an' I've come to the judgment that we've gotta get together an' patch it up for keeps."

Doc brightened. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Hoss. More than a week ago, we stockholders held a meeting, decided there must be a way to shake you out of your stubbornness, and guaranteed Lutley a twenty per cent bonus on those remaining eight shares if he'd hold onto them for you."

"Guaranteed?" Hoss scowled. "Meanin' what, Doc?"

"We paid him the bonus in cash—two thousand dollars. We deem it small price, Hoss, to have you with us, to make this strictly a community enterprise."

A brittle little laugh escaped Hoss' lips. "Small price, eh? Every little bit added to what Lutley gets makes just a little bit more for him. How much money have you paid that skunk? How many of you have taken up your pledges?"

Doc's face went chill again. "Damned if I can understand you, Hoss. You come here suggesting that you get together with us, then start right in running down the man upon whom we depend so fully."

"No, Doc. I came suggestin' that you come over to my way of thinkin'. How much mazuma has that polecat collected?"

"I've paid him up—ten thousand, plus five hundred on that bonus. Tillotson, the Santells, Tim Mears and the Widder Snodgrass have paid in full—let's see, that adds to about twenty-one thousand, including the bonus money for your shares, maybe a little more. Ben Bardin has paid fifty-five hundred cash and is negotiating a five thousand dollar loan in Phoenix."

"In other words, Lutley's collected all but about five thousand in pledges an' a possible eight thousand on the shares he's holdin' for me. Something around forty thousand dollars."

"That's right. We're well financed for

a thorough test of the oil sands in the Swale."

"Thorough test, me eye! Of all the poor pilgrims ever I heard of, you fellers is the worst. You need legal guardeens. I gotta work faster than I thought, Doc. Thanks for the breakfast. Gotta be gettin' into Alamo to see a coyote about his mange."

He was on his feet, moving toward the door. Doc Petersmith was rushing around the table to cut him off. "No, Hoss. I don't know what you're planning, but you must be reasonable. You just don't understand. You. . . ."

Hoss brushed him off with a sweep of his arm, went out and got onto his horse. His face was set in a mask of cold reserve as he turned the animal's head toward Alamo City. And behind an increasing thoughtfulness was a lurking suggestion of inhumanity—something that more than one of his enemies had learned to interpret to their sorrow.

★

IT WAS midforenoon when Hoss rode into the little cow metropolis of Pronto range. Underneath the apparent calm, Hoss sensed a tension hardly normal to the place. As the echoes of his horse's hoofbeats began to fling back and forth across the faded store-fronts, a man posted at an awning support turned into the Paradise Saloon. Another darted from the wide opening of Henderson's Stables and scampered a dozen doors along the street to the cubby office of Sheriff Job Speedout.

Hoss's jaws tightened and a characteristic arrogance stirred behind a chill of feature more periodical than habitual. Holding an unhurried pace, he let his glance run the hitchracks. A number of horses switched flies as they waited for their riders but there was not one he could connect with Lutley and his following.

Hoss lit down before the sheriff's office and when he had finished tying and had stepped to the walk, he saw tawny Job Speedout come to his door and stand there scowling at him, his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

Hoss knew this tall, sober, fearless man as a good officer and never one to be underestimated. At this moment, before a word was spoken, Hoss knew Job was waiting to spring an unrelished pronouncement. And, as was always his way, Hoss dulled the thunder of it. "Mornin', Job. I've bin told this is the day you'll be wantin' to see me."

"Mornin' to you, Hoss. I was just fixin' to ride to Tres Alamos to get you."

"Anything special, Job?"

"Sorta, Hoss. I've bin handed a warrant for yore arrest."

"Anything serious?"

"Reckon you'd call it such, Hoss. Murder."

"Morder, *humph!* Who've I murdered this time, Job?"

"Feller name uh Johnny Bark, one of Lutley's oil-well crew."

"Yeah? Got me down to poppin' off pilgrims now, eh? Who swore out the warrant?"

"Buford Lutley."

"Of course. His way of turnin' public attention off his own soiled shirt. It won't work, Job."

"It's a mizzable chore for me to do, Hoss," said the sheriff, wearily. "You an' me—we've bin friends a long time. I'm hopin' you won't make it no more difficult by bein' snuffy."

"Most certainly not, Job. After I get a few things offa my mind, I'll come in an' let the law go through the motions of exoneratin' me."

Job Speedout shook his head. "Sorry, Hoss. What's on your mind will have to wait. This is a murder charge. No bail. No delay. No augerments. I've got the cell all swept out an' clean blankets on the cot. You goin' peaceable?"

"Not now, Job." Hoss was speaking as softly as if discussing the weather. "How bad you want me . . . now? How far you prepared to go to jail me before I'm ready to be jailed?"

For a long minute their eyes locked silently. It was the sheriff's gaze that wavered, swept aside. Job Speedout, without a fibre of cowardice in him, shrugged his shoulders and let his hands fall away from his belt. His voice was that of a man who had lacked conviction from the first. "Say the word, Hoss, an' I'll turn in my star. I can't go no farther than that."

"That's too far, Job. You an' me, we

understand one another. We're the only hope this country's got to keep out of the hands of crooks, shysters an' schemin' politicians. We gotta stick together, Job. Now where's the skunk that swore out that warrant? Where's Buford Lutley?"

"When he left here, Hoss, he went to the Paradise. There's six, eight men with him—all heeled. Now don't go down there an' start somethin' with them boys, Hoss, or I will have to resign."

"I'll let them start it," said Hoss, striding away. "I'll finish it."

He crossed the street, hitching his gun, and shouldered into the Paradise Saloon. There were several men at the bar and Tom Hines, the owner, stood easily at the bar end. Hoss stood there, blinking his eyes, looking old and drawn and just a little pitiful when compared with the man he sought. "Where's Lutley, Tom?" he barked.

Tom Hines straightend. "He's gone. Left about the time you hauled into town. Can't say I blame him. He told all over town how you'd threatened the lives of himself and his men. Looks like you're old enough to be outgrowing this thirst for blood, Hoss."

"Where'd he go, Tom?"

"Out back. He and his boys tied their horses there."

Hoss went out the back ,his spurs singing. His quarry was gone. Wearily, with

They had a grave to dig at Rattlesnake Springs. . . . And the hard-riding cowboys roweled cruelly to keep up with Hoss. . . .

the feeling he had let a golden opportunity slip through his fingers by stopping at Doc Petersmith's, Hoss went again to the street. A distant echo of hoofbeats drew his glance to the west. And there they came—the Double Diamond crew, with Gil Pastime at their head. And as they neared, with a dust cloud trailing behind them, he could see their eagerness, the time-honored lure of conflict for strong, virile men.

They spotted him and they swerved to the walk and lit down. Gil came to Hoss with an obvious swagger. "What's up, boss? Sure must be pretty bad, when you

call us in for the gun smokin'." His voice took on a sarcastic edge. "Ain' you some scairt we'll git barked up, Hoss?"

Hoss ignored the thrust, his eyes going over the dozen working cowpunchers. He frowned. "Where's Little Gid?"

Gil shrugged, grinning. "That feller ain't gettin' no smarter, Hoss. He routed us outa bed to tell hs what you wanted, spent the night an' left with us this mornin', early. But over yonder, by the buttes, he cut to the east, sayin' he had to see some drinkin' water about a dead-man. Last we seen of him, he was lopin' around a shoulder of the Mangas ridge, to'rds Rattlesnake Springs. . . ."

Old Hoss murmured an agonized: "Good God!" His eyes went down the street to where Old Peter Scarborough was opening up the Alamo State Bank. "Wait for me, boys, till I see just how bad I've muffed it." He bowlegged to the bank and went in. The banker, a good man or a bad one depending on the state of a man's dealings with him, eyed Hoss.

"When you come here early in the morning, Greer," he said, something meant for humor splashing across his withered cheeks, "you always want money. I'm afraid you're out of luck."

"Lutley cash some checks, did he?"

"Why, yes." Scarborough seemed surprised. "He's sending a wagon outfit from Fort Bowie to El Paso, for drilling tools. He was leaving before bank opening this morning, so I opened for him last night."

"That's all I want to know," said Hoss, and went right out again. He got his horse and motioned his men into their saddles. "Gil, take half the boys an' burn the trail for Reno Pass. If you're ahead of that oil outfit, stop 'em an' fetch 'em to Tres Alamos. If they beat you through, chase after 'em. The rest of you come with me. We may have a grave to dig at Rattlesnake Springs."

CHAPTER FIVE

Bloodstained Dividends

HOSS saw the body lying at the edge of the pond when he topped the low rise and had his first look into the Swale. And though the six hard-riding boys behind him roweled cruelly to keep up, he pulled away from them, making a running dismount at the water's edge and knelt beside Little Gid.

The little fellow, who seemed to harvest nothing but grief from his beloved range experience, lay half-in, half-out of the water, his face on the handle of a sawed-off shovel he had brought from the round-up camp. He lay like one dead and he was cold as death—chilled by the water, and Hoss thought he was dead until he caught the faint pulse of blood under his jaw bone. He had been shot through the back under the shoulder blades, had bled a lot and Hoss was afraid his spine had been severed.

"If that spine ain't hurt too bad," he told his punchers, "Gid's got a fair chance. Let's see what we can find at the oil camp."

They made Gid comfortable for the moment, and rode to the camp. It was abandoned, without any room for doubt. All the men's personal effects were gone except one old bed blanket, which Hoss appropriated to fashion a saddle sling to carry the wounded man. Scattered about the junk rig were odds and ends of tools and cable, with which Lutley had carried down a shallow hole. Little Gid had called the turn perfectly and now, imbued with the loyalty that had made Hoss and his punchers overlook his shortcomings in the past, Gid had gone down to death's door in revealing the tell-tale dead-man that he had located and pried a few inches above the water even as he was shot.

"Take him to Doc Petree, in Alamo, an' tell him I said to keep him there an' spare no expense to pull him through. You fellers hang around town until you hear from Gil or me, keepin' your ears skinned back for a feller named Lutley—Buford Lutley—an' his oil crew. If you locate 'em, never let 'em outa yore sight!"

OLD HOSS GREER seldom abused a pony, but he abused this one, holding a killing pace to the spot that would make or break his beliefs regarding Buford Lutley. The crooked promoter had spoken to the banker about freighting tools in from El Paso. This, to Hoss, was a plant, designed to confuse any possible pursuit, draw it away from his real route of departure.

With the belief that Lutley would strike westward, Hoss rode the spurs to the Bitter Creek Corridor—a winding, slot-like break in the hills and the shortest trail into the Prescott country and the railroad. Also, which was more important to Hoss, it was at this time of year a place where a horseman could not hide his tracks.

The sands at the mouth of the Corridor did not disappoint the old cowman. Here he found a welter of horse tracks, where a body of riders had milled. Scattered about were the butts of many cigarettes and a savagely chewed and unlighted cigar.

Wise in matter of sign, Hoss read into these tracks a protracted discussion, maybe an argument—probably the latter, because he picked a bandanna handkerchief from the brush stiff with blood.

It was plain that some had wanted to continue through the Corridor and on to the railroad as fast as horseflesh could carry them. But the majority had voted against it. The tracks turned right into the hills. Hoss followed, more slowly and with his senses keyed up and alert to trouble ahead.

This led nowhere unless it was to the hill ranch of the Widder Snodgrass, and beyond to the spread of a little nester who had quit several years before.

Hoss was beginning to believe that Lutley and his men were heading for that abandoned spread until he climbed a ridge in the dusk and looked down upon the widder's ranch yard. Eight horses were tethered there. A window showed a light gleaming faintly in the half light. Cautiously, Hoss rode down a slanting trail, his movement hidden by the tall brush lining the trail. Tying his pony at the foot of the hill, he moved to the house, sliding silently along the wall toward the door.

From inside came a low murmur of voices, and a whimpering such as a frightened puppy might make. Then the calm of the spot was sundered by a shrill voice from within, a voice vibrant with agony and desperation. "I'll arrange for the money. She's telling you the truth that she doesn't keep her money here. Turn her loose and I'll guarantee all you ask, if it takes me all my life to earn it. What good will it do to torture her if you don't get the money?"

Old Hoss gasped. That was Doc Petersmith's voice. How had he gotten pitch-forked into Buford Lutley's getaway? Lutley was ignoring him.

"Bill, you got them whips around the old woman's thumbs? Good. Now you look here, Missus Snodgrass. Everybody knows you don't patronize the bank. You're the only one that paid in cash—gold. Speak the word that tells where

you keep your bank and no harm will come to you. Play stubborn, hoping to save the stuff, and I'll jerk your thumbs out by the roots. Now be reasonable and put an end to this foolishness!"

"You do that," screamed Doc Petersmith, "and my friend Hoss Greer will kill you!"

"Slap that little squirt in the mouth," ordered Lutley, and there was a crash of flesh against flesh, a solid bump against the floor, a groan. And then a woman's voice, tired and resigned. . . .

"A sad day for this range," said the Widder Snodgrass, as if to herself, "when we failed to heed that wise old fightin' man—Hoss Greer. If ever I come outa this mess alive, I'll crawl on my everlastin' knees to ask his forgiveness for what I thought an' said about him."

"Me, too, Missus Snodgrass," came Doc Petersmith's groan from the floor.

"Hoss Greer is a bull-headed, blundering old fool," rapped Lutley. "It was only his quarrelsomeness that saved him his money. I only wish I had the time to pay the old goat a visit, call his bluff, and explode the legend of his gun magic. For the last time, woman, where's that money?"

"Find it yourself, you skinbound, gimlet-eyed, penny-pinching buzzard." A vast rage bubbled and boiled in this woman who took her place and held it against the best on the range—a rage that made her scornful of pain and death. "I'll be double damned if I'll tell you anything!"

Hoss, hearing her, felt pride that he knew her kind of people and admired them and would fight to the death for them. The old timer let a gust of breath, rough and explosive, rasp from his lungs. He shook his angular shoulders, cast a wary glance behind him. It was then he first saw the still figure spreadeagled before the door of the bunkhouse. Old Pud Pennypacker, who puttered around the ranch now when the boys were on the range work, had given all he had for his outfit. It hadn't been enough; no one man could be enough against these devils. That fact didn't seem important now.

"Pull her up, Bill," barked Buford Lutley, and the Widder Snodgrass cried out and Old Hoss crashed across the threshold, his shoulder smashing the door inward on its hinges.

Hoss had a momentary glimpse of Doc Petersmith lying on the floor, propped on one elbow, vainly trying to stem the flow of blood from a face beaten to a pulp. He saw the Widder Snodgrass standing on tiptoe, her arms drawn high by loops about her thumbs and a rope drawn over the ceiling beam. Hoss saw the burly, brutish man holding the pressure against that rope and his enormous rage broke all restraint and his gun flashed out and he drove a slug squarely into that man's middle.

The man collapsed like a burst bubble and Widder Snodgrass fell to the puncheon floor and Hoss was roaring: "Call my bluff, eh Lutley? Explode my gun magic, eh? All you ever exploded was men's faith in men, by plantin' dead-men in God's water holes. Take it!"

Those words rolled out as Lutley drew and then the roar of the other six men beat against the walls and the oil promoter was bellowing obscene oaths and calling upon his men to kill. Hoss didn't wait for Lutley to shoot. He dropped the hammer of his piece and the light jarred on its wick. Lutley screamed: "He's got me!" and his body plumped to the floor. And Doc Petersmith pounced upon him as an eagle fells its prey, palmed his gun and turned it upon the triggering oil crew, his eyes blazing and his teeth bared in a way quite unbefitting a tenderfoot.

The light was dimmed as all those guns commenced to blare in that confined space. Hoss' nerves and muscles and mind were perfectly tuned as he bent to the grim work that had made him such a legendary figure in cattleland. He shot a man in the belly, put him down. The man tried to shoot from the floor, but the Widder Snodgrass, whose hands were helpless, kicked him in the head and put him out.

A bullet caught Hoss in the hip, spinning him about, staggering him. He shot and killed the man as he spun. Another aimed deliberately and two guns exploded almost as one. But Hoss was first and the man dropped with a loud, despairing cry. Hoss shot him again as he fell—and took another bullet across his chest.

Doc had felled a man charging for the door and winged another who would

have gotten Hoss from the old cowman's rear. Hoss' gun clicked empty and he stood unarmed before the open door as one of the remaining renegades tried to rush it, with spitting weapon. But the fellow knew little of gunplay and Hoss knocked him down with the swinging barrel of his pistol. That left just one man and his panic was not so great as to try to run past that grizzled terror at the door. He struck for the window. Widder Snodgrass tripped him. He went through the pane, head first, Doc's bullet finding him in mid-flight. He shrieked, thudded to the ground outside and lay still.

It was over. The lamp burned even again. Doc Petersmith knelt beside the Widder, freeing her thumbs. She stared over his shoulder, a look of admiration on her face as she watched Hoss kick guns away from a couple of moaning wounded men on the floor.

"Hoss Greer," she said, her voice full and unshaken by her experience. "I allus had great respect for you as a cowman, but yore shootin', swashbucklin' hell an' damnation I never could abide. I've considered you a childish, cantankerous ol' reprobate that was willin' to shed blood to prove you was cheatin' ol' age. I was as wrong about that, seems like, as I was about Lutley an' his oil."

"Modesty," murmured Hoss, slyly, "prevents me from answerin', madam."

"Don't you madam me, Hoss Greer." Matilda Snodgrass was on her feet, waggling her finger at him. "An' don't you come none of yore fancy hypocrisy on me. Say what you think, straight out."

"Matilda," Hoss was grinning in spite of his throbbing hip, "as pure cowfolks, you rate ace-high with me. Yore late departed husband an' me was good friends. I admire the way you taken over an' run the spread successful in his absence. For that I could forgive you a-wearin' pants, which same no self respectin' female should be seen in."

"Never was but the one man, Hoss," said the widder, "that could inspire me to shed levis fer skirts. That was Sam Snodgrass. But I'm confessin' that when you come through that door with blood in yore eyes an' a smokin' gun in yore fist, you was the most beautiful man ever I looked at twice. You shore touched my heart most mortal, an' if that's a proposal of matrimony, brash an' unashamed, make the most of it. The keys to the Cross Bar are yours, without even the askin', Hoss."

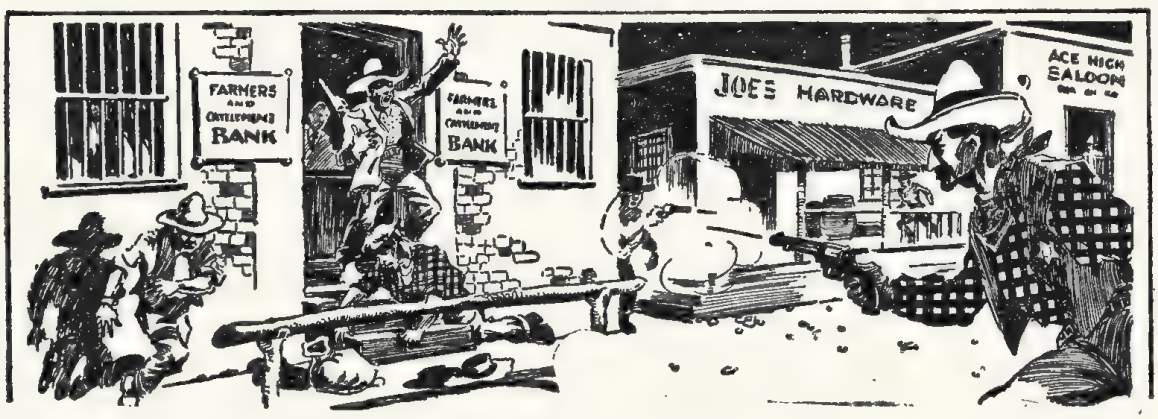
A tremor touched Hoss' cheeks. "Speakin' as one man, Matilda," he said, "them brave an' fearless words you spoke to Lutley, with torture an' death hangin' over your head, would drive most any man into the teeth of a buzz-saw. I'll be a little too busy, come round-up an' all, to consider matrimony serious, now. But, come Christmas, I'll come a-callin', Matilda, if I feel the way I feel now."

"Spoke like a man," grinned the Widder. "Shake." She wiped her hands down the legs of her levis and shook his hand with a firm grip.

"And they make much over the courtship of Miles Standish," sighed Little Doc Petersmith. "Please consider my application as best man and a ticket to the wedding dance. Now let's go out and see if they've got our money on their saddles, the buzzards."

"Bad luck to cuss the dead, Doc," said Hoss, and the Widder nodded agreement. Arm in arm they walked from that room into the bright sunlight. . . .

THE END



CHAPTER ONE

Rabbits Don't Pack Guns!

HE SIGNED on at old Hardy West's cowspread on the Llano River as Banks Presnall. He made it a point not to tell where he came from and Hardy West wasn't the kind to make an issue of that. The kid said he was twenty and able to hold down his end of the job.

The Bar W rancher grinned faintly. He figured the kid was lying by a couple of years to get his name on the payroll. Hardy West tallied him for a seventeen year old, maybe eighteen, but signed him on as a horse wrangler. It wasn't till he had to make a spring beef and calf gather, short-handed, that the rancher learned he'd hired a top hand in any man's crew.

The solemn-eyed kid swung a big old "community" loop that never missed a catch. Heel or head—it made no difference to Banks Presnall. He was right in there with the goods. On time, and every time. And somewhere he'd learned a thing lots of good hands never learned—that was how to get work out of a horse without riding him to death.

But by this time, his weaknesses had begun to show up, too. Banks Presnall didn't fit in with the crew. He was too quiet, too moody, too sensitive. He took the hoorawing every young hand has to take around a cow camp. But he didn't come back with anything to show he knew it was all in fun. He'd grin a shy grin, maybe, if the horseplay wasn't too rough. Other times, the hurt showed plain in his eyes and he'd hunt any excuse to get out of camp as quickly as possible.

He took to riding and working alone when he could. He talked even less. Mealtimes, he'd come in and load his tin plate with beans and beefsteak and then back off out of the camp circle before he hunkered down on his rusty bootheels to eat. Nights, he bedded alone, away from the balance of the crew, and if there was any sign of a six-shooter or a saddlegun wrapped in his ragged bedroll, nobody ever saw it.

They Grow 'em Tough On The Llano!

Dramatic Cowpuncher Novel

By FRED GIPSON

The steer tried to quit the country; dragging a saddle, and a boy with one foot hung in the stirrup. . . .

Rance Hunter told the peaceful kid horse-wrangler: "There's times when every man runs up against something he can't shove down, or crawl over, or dig himself under. Then he needs a gun to blast his way through!" But Rance never guessed that his advice would start, on its bloody course the deadliest human fighting machine ever to scour in blood a renegade-ridden range!

Now and then, a man would catch him riding along, or maybe just sitting his saddle, and staring out across the landscape with a lonesome look in his eyes. They joshed him a heap about some honkytonk girl breaking his young heart.

Hands that admired his rope and saddle work soon learned to let him alone and respect the privacy he seemed to want. The rest called him Rabbit and were outspoken in their disgust.

"A man or a dog that won't take his own part," declared Lake Spoons, "ain't worth the salt it'd take to cure his hide!"

The crew was squatted around the supper fire when Lake Spoons said that and he was looking straight at Banks Presnall when he said it. The kid glanced up at him with that hurt look in his eyes, then lowered his head. White-faced, he got up and pitched out half a plate of beans and put the plate and cup into the dishpan. Then he picked up a rope and left the circle of light to go catch out his night horse.

Lake Spoons's laugh was sudden and ugly. Lake was bronc-twister for the outfit, a long, tall, spur-jingling rider who ran to mouth a lot. He was the sort who liked to wear a pink silk shirt and both six-shooters when he rode in for the mail. He liked to walk the streets with his spur straps let out to the town notch. His idea of humor was a practical joke that caused somebody else humiliation or pain.

"No more guts than a cottontail rabbit!" he jeered that night when Banks Presnall went out to saddle his horse for the first watch without finishing his bait of beans.

After that, Lake Spoons made life a hell on earth for the kid. He never missed a chance to jerk the kid's floppy old black hat down over his eyes and ears. He liked to whip the knot-end of his saddle rope under the tail of whatever horse Banks Presnall was riding and booger him into pitching.

The kid kept out of Lake Spoons's way as much as he could and when he couldn't, he took what was dished out. Without a whimper. Without apparent resentment. He just wouldn't stand his ground like a man.

Ranse Hunter got a bellyful of it the last day of the round-up. They were making a final circle, combing the roughs for any stray stuff that might have bushed up and been missed in the gather. Lake Spoons jumped a big, four-year-old longhorn out of a patch of shinnery brush at the head of a deep-cut draw. The old scalawag lifted his tail and took out down the draw in a rattle-hock run. Lake Spoon knew that brockle-faced steer. He'd managed to hide out every roundup for the last three years. A man might catch that *ladino,* but there wasn't enough hands on the Bar W payroll to drive him into the gather the boys were holding out on the flats. That old steer simply wouldn't turn from a horse.

Lake Spoons downed his rope. He cut loose with a wild yell and raked his horse with his big Chihuahua spurs.

But the big-mouthed peeler was too accustomed to raking a horse with those big spurs. Under them, and the spade bit the peeler persisted in using, his horse had fretted away his energy. He was winded and gave out. He lacked the getaway he needed to close the gap between him and that leggy steer to roping distance.

Banks Presnall might have had all this figured and he might not. He had started to ride down into the draw, aiming to cross ahead of Lake Spoons. He heard the brush popping and swung around in his saddle to see the fast-running steer pulling away from the bronc-twister's stumbling horse. He reached for his rope and shook out a loop. The steer plunged into the opening in front of him. The kid swung his loop one time and twined those wide-spread horns. He jerked up the slack in his rope and felt his horse wheel and squat, fore feet spread and braced. Ready to take the load.

The big steer hit the end of the rope and stood on his head. He hit the ground, bounced to his feet, and ran against the rope a second time. At that instant, the yelling Lake Spoons ran his loggy horse square against that breast-high rope.

It had galled Lake Spoons to see the kid rope a steer that by rights was his. Split-second thinking had showed Lake a way out. He'd make out he couldn't see the kid or stop the down-hill run of his horse.

He'd leave it to the kid to do whatever

he could about the mix-up that was sure to result.

★

HIS horse plowed into that humming rope and the kid's frazzled girth couldn't take the strain. It parted with a snap. The tight rope stripped the saddle over the horse's head and Banks Presnall went with it.

They landed in a pile with a rattle that knocked the wind out of the kid and spooked the wall-eyed steer. He snorted and wheeled and tried to quit the country, dragging a saddle and a boy with one boot hung in a stirrup.

Ranse Hunter had topped the rise on the far side of the draw in time to see the play shaping up. He set hooks to his mount and took him off down a steep, brushy slope in a buck-jumping, butt-sliding run. The horse had more speed than he could handle on that slant. He hit the bottom and half fell across the draw ahead of the steer. But Ranse Hunter had turned in his saddle.

He made a back-hand cast that he realized later was close to a miracle—Ranse Hunter was a heap better with a gun than he was with a rope. The loop tightened on the steer's heels and the animal went down. Ranse Hunter piled out of the saddle and was on him before he could get to his feet and finish that death drag he'd begun.

The half-stunned kid got up but his foot was still caught in the stirrup. The spur had run through the ox-bow, along with his boot, and he had to slip his foot out of the boot to get loose. He dragged the boot back on and turned to Ranse Hunter, wiping the dirt and trash out of his eyes and hair.

"I'm sure much obliged, Ranse," he said.

"That's all right, kid," said Ranse Hunter. "Hand me that piece of short rope off your saddle and we'll side-line this steer. Then we'll be ready to drag some of the paw and beller out of a big-mouthed bronc-peeler!"

The kid limped toward the downed steer with the piece of rope. "No," he said. "I don't figure Lake Spoons aimed to do it. Likely, he couldn't stop his horse. Or he was just pranking. Why would anybody want to see a man git dragged to death by a wild steer?"

Ranse Hunter's cold eyes flickered with a sudden soft light, then hardened perceptibly. He went to work, tying a fore foot of that old scalawag steer to a hind foot with a short length of rope between, so he couldn't run when he got up.

Lake Spoons rode up out of the brush, leading the kid's horse. There was a wide ugly grin on his mouth and a jeering gleam in his bold eyes.

"Looks like, Rabbit," he said, "that you latched that fast rope of yourn onto more'n a kid could handle. The next time, you better leave the heavy rope work to a man."

The kid looked up at the bronc-peeler, frowning as if he didn't understand. Ranse Hunter worked feverishly at his side-lining to keep from dragging a six-shooter and knocking Lake Spoons out of the saddle. Lake looked down at the kid and then threw back his head and cut loose with his cackling, jeering laugh again. He dropped the bridle reins of Banks Presnall's horse and rode on down the draw.

Ranse Hunter helped the kid patch his busted saddle girth and set his kak. He told him to haze the outlaw steer toward the holding ground. Then he mounted and rode down the draw at a fast running walk, following Lake Spoons.

The bronc-twister turned in his saddle when he heard Ranse Hunter's big cat-footed bay overtaking him. Ranse Hunter waited for no preliminaries.

"Lake," he said in a cold, flat voice, "you lay off that kid from here on out. If I catch you pestering him again, I'm dragging the brag out of you. And it won't be with my fists!"

A flicker of fear lit Lake Spoons's bold eyes for a second. Rumor had it that this long-geared, quiet-spoken Ranse Hunter had heard more than one owl hoot in the faraway places. Ranse Hunter neither denied nor confirmed these rumors. He merely kept his mouth shut and his guns polished. And the twister knew it for a fact that old Hardy West had signed on this cold-eyed jasper at gunhand wages since he and young Rob Tarver had had that run-in over water rights on Salt Branch. It was Lake Spoons's private opinion that Ranse

Hunter was a slick-fingered gunman and a killer. The twister grudgingly admitted that he didn't want to give him an even break and tackle him. But it burned the big-mouth Lake to take backwater. His thin lips curled back in a wolfish snarl.

"I wouldn't grab off a bigger chunk than I could swaller, gun-dog," he said. "You might git a jolt of surprise when somebody made you eat one of them purty six-shooters!"

But Ranse Hunter was already turning away. "You heard what I said," he told the twister in the same level tones.

He didn't bother to look back.

Lake Spoons's eyes glittered like steel slits as he watched the gunman ride off. He was half-tempted to draw his six-shooter and blow the stiffener out of the tall rider's backbone. Telling him what he could do and what he couldn't! He bared his long teeth like a run-down wolf making a stand-off fight.

"Sometime," he muttered, "somebody's going to shoot the belly off that long-geared son. And if that Rabbit Presnall had the guts to pack a gun, he'd git the same dose of medicine!"

CHAPTER TWO

Hangrope Handicap

THE beef gather was sold right there on the holding ground the next day and the bunch rode into headquarters, where old Hardy West ordered the hands to jerk the shoes off the remuda and turn the horses out on the range. After that, he said they would all roundside a spell and feed up good, since there wasn't much to be done. But he didn't lay off any hands for this slack season, like he was used to doing.

If old Hardy West could read the signs right, he was in for trouble over water with young Rob Tarver, who owned a big outfit up Salt Branch. Might be, he'd need every hand on the payroll to settle that difficulty in his favor.

Since none of the boys warmed up to Banks Presnall, the kid knew little or nothing about the ranch owner's trouble. Banks Presnall continued to keep to himself, same as usual. He did more chores around the place than anybody else and still managed to keep out of Lake Spoons's way.

At first, the kid was mighty shy around Tommie West. Then he found out that the brown-eyed, slender daughter of old Hardy West had started a collection of wild flowers in a special bed she'd dug up under the live-oaks out in the front yard. After that, it wasn't long till the two of them were becoming good friends.

The kid had never known a friendship like this before and had discovered a kind of happiness that he'd never thought could be his. He rode with the girl every chance he got and flower-hunted by himself when she couldn't come along.

The crew joshed him a little about his flower-hunting, but rode Lake Spoons a lot harder. They knew that the flashy, spur-jingling rider considered himself a top-hand lady's man, and they knew he'd had his predatory eye on Tommie West for a good long spell. They told him it was a hell of a note, him allowing a little timid duck like Rabbit Presnall to run under him with his best girl.

"You don't pull an apple till she's ripe," was Lake Spoons's braggy come-back. "Likewise, I ain't robbing no cradles. I'm giving her time to git her growth, then I'll step in and take over. I'll be learning her what it's all about while that rabbity kid's still hunting his purty flowers!"

But their ribbing galled the bronc-peeler more than he liked to let on. He was itching to get his big hands on the kid just one time. He'd learn that lily-livered thing to shine up to a girl like Tommie West. A ragged, patch-seated drifter of his caliber, acting like money in the bank!

But he couldn't get the chance. That cold-eyed Ranse Hunter would always show up just at the right time, his bleak glance casual, but enough to tie Lake Spoons's hands. Lake Spoons wouldn't have admitted it to another soul, but the eyes of Ranse Hunter sent cold shivers running up his backbone every time he looked at them.

To realize that he was afraid of anything, especially of a man, rode Lake Spoons harder than the ribbing he had to take or the sight of Banks Presnall riding with Tommie West. He told himself he'd

back-shoot that gun-dog one of these days. But all he did was fight his booze harder. He was fast becoming a quart-a-day man and his red-rimmed eyes and surly moods showed it.

If the kid was aware of all this, he kept it hidden. He was having the time of his life. He and the laughing Tommie had their flower bed crammed with wild flowers now, and they'd taken to robbing quail's nests and setting the eggs under chicken hens. They aimed to grow themselves a bunch of wild birds, if this first batch of eggs hatched off and the little uns did well. The kid was now living the boy's life he'd missed in the dark years behind him.

Ranse Hunter found the youngsters on the river bank one day, laughing and shouting as they fought a big blue catfish they'd hooked onto out in a deep hole. The dead willow pole was threatening to break in Banks Presnall's hands and the girl was leaning far out over the water, trying to get her hands on the swishing line. She lost her balance. She shrieked, hit the water with a splash and went under.

The kid threw down his pole and was in the water after her before she came up. But she beat him out on the bank and stood laughing at him as he splashed after her. Then shouting with laughter, they both jumped back into the water, swimming out to retrieve the floating pole that the catfish was dragging to the far side.

Ranse Hunter swung his horse away from the river and rode off with a warm light shining in his eyes. It was a warmth few men had ever seen in those cold blue orbs.

"I wonder now if I've been wrong," he mused. "Maybe it's going to work out, after all!"

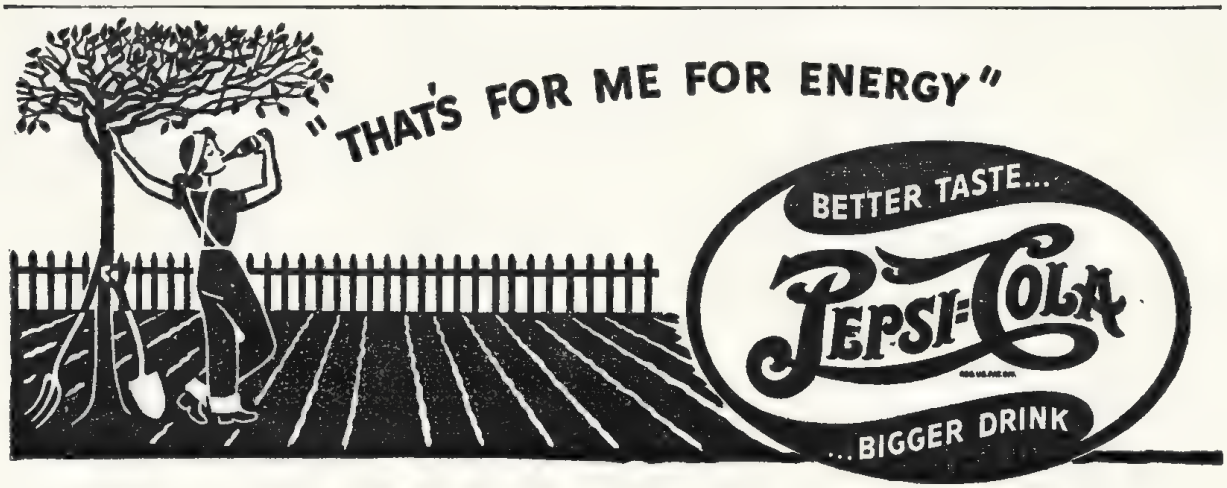
★

HE WAS riding in from the south side of the range the next day when he rounded a bend in the trail and came upon a sight that made him realize that the thing could never work out for the boy as old Jim Presnall had planned it.

Banks Presnall stood under a wide-spread live-oak with blood running out of one corner of his mouth and the noose of a hangrope around his neck. About him were three men on horseback, one of them trying to pitch the knot-end of the hangrope over a high limb. To one side stood a saddled horse with trailing bridle reins. And lying sprawled in the trail was the body of Lake Spoons, with half his face shot away.

Ranse Hunter recognized the three men as his big bay jogged forward at a mile-eating running walk. One was Rob Tarver, owner of the Slash T outfit which joined the Bar W on this side of the range. Tarver had a fat face and a bristling, week-old beard. The next man was his top gunhand, Jess Devine, a slim, light-haired man with the cold deadliness in his light eyes that characterized his kind. The third man, Ranse Hunter recognized as Clark Hough, one of Tarver's regular cowhands.

The hanging was halted suddenly when the group caught sight of Ranse Hunter. He rode on up without checking the gait of his horse or saying a word and swung



his horse in close to the kid. The three sat there, tense and expectant, and watched him take the rope from the kid's neck.

"Go git your horse, kid," Ranse Hunter ordered, speaking quietly.

Banks Presnall went for his horse.

Rob Tarver swallowed hard a couple of times and started talking fast. "He shot Lake Spoons," he charged. "Shot him in the back of the head. We seen him when he done it. We knowed about how hard Lake's been riding the kid, but that wasn't no excuse for a murder like this. It made us so mad we was fixing to hang the rat!"

Ranse Hunter's eyes bored into the men. He sensed a tenseness in the air. He looked at the piggish eyes of Rob Tarver, then at the other two men. Rob Tarver's face was congested with rage. Jess Devine's was blank with thin lips curled away from yellow teeth. The third man was coiling his rage, ready to spring.

Banks Presnall came out of the brush, leading his horse.

"Git on him and ride on down the trail, kid," said Ranse Hunter.

The kid got on his horse and rode on down the trail. Ranse Hunter kept sitting there in his saddle and staring at the three men, not saying a word.

The men shifted uneasily in their saddles. They looked at each other, then back at Ranse Hunter. The fingers of Jess Devine kept working like the talons of a nervous monkey. There was a curious flicker in the cold face of Ranse Hunter as he watched those fingers. He seemed to be waiting for something, almost hopefully, but nothing came of it.

Rob Tarver couldn't stand it. He exploded suddenly, then checked his speech before he'd uttered one intelligible word. The face of Jess Devine was a mask of hate. Ranse Hunter swung his big bay around and rode off down the trail. But he rode turned in his saddle and watching over his shoulder. And that faint contemptuous smile was still on his face as Rob Tarver and his men watched him disappear behind the brush.

The kid rode hunched in the saddle, staring down at the ground. The fright was gone out of his eyes now and there was a hint of hopeless tears in them. There was a bitter twist to his mouth and he kept swallowing.

"I seen Lake a hundred yards up the trail from where he was shot," he explained to Ranse Hunter. "I seen I was fixing to hit the trail where I'd meet up with him, so I pulled up and waited a little bit. He's been harder to put up with lately, and I figured I'd wait till he rode on.

"Then down yonder I heard a shot. Figured Lake had shot at a coyote or something. I kept waiting and waiting but he never rounded the bend. Finally I rode down and found him laying back yonder. That's where them three found me. They claimed right off I done it, so they set out to hang me for it."

Ranse Hunter kept looking back over his shoulder. "You're a fool for not wearing a gun!" he said bluntly.

The kid glanced at him. The deep, child-like hurt in his eyes made Ranse Hunter flinch.

"You know I promised pa," the kid said quietly. "I told him I'd do what he said."

Emotion made Ranse Hunter's voice flat and harsher than usual. "It don't make a damn what he had you promise. There's times when a man runs up against something he can't shove down or crawl over or dig himself under. Then he needs a gun to blast his way through. Jim thought he was doing right, but he was a fool to drag a promise like that out of a boy."

CHAPTER THREE

In the Wolves' Den

TALL, white-haired old Hardy West was standing by the bunkhouse when the two rode up.

"Was that creek-bed dry, Ranse?" he questioned.

Ranse Hunter nodded. "It was dry," he said. "They've cut off the water at the dam!" Then he told what he'd just run into.

Hardy West's leathery face blackened and his piercing blue eyes bored into Banks Presnall. The kid read suspicion in them and sickened.

"Maybe Rob was right!" Hardy West

snapped. "Maybe the kid did do it!"

Ranse Hunter stiffened and his pale blue eyes iced over. "I said the kid never done it!" he snapped.

The old man blinked and he backed up a step. "All right! All right!" he said hastily. "I reckon you know what you're doing, Ranse. But the set-up sure looks suspicious."

Ranse Hunter stepped toward Hardy West, his cold eyes deadly as snakes. "Let's get this straight right here, old man," he said. "Rob Tarver and his bunch killed Lake Spoons, like I said. The kid never done it. He's never packed a gun since he signed on here and he wasn't packing one today. If you don't want to believe that, I'll draw my time right now and ride on. If you do, just remember—I'm running this show till the curtain falls."

The kid watched old Hardy West's face turn purple with wrath, then slowly drain out to a pasty white.

"All right! All right!" Hardy West repeated in a peevish tone. "You don't have to git so damn' hard about it, Ranse. I reckon Rob's started it, all right, like you say. I've got first water rights on Salt Branch, but Rob Tarver's above me. Water enough for both in good years, but this year there ain't enough for one. I can water at the Llano, but then it's too far back to grazing for my stock. Rob knows this, but he's cutting me off anyhow. Him and Lake tangled awhile back—been bad blood between them for better'n a year now!"

The reason for the bad blood came to the bunkhouse door with a broom in her hand. Tommie West had a red-and-white checked cloth tied around her hair. She spoke crisply: "Just because the hands wallow in the dirt out on round-up is no sign they have to pack their filth in here. The river's not so low they can't take a bath now and then."

She saw Banks Presnall and said, "Hello, Banks. Did you find us anything today?"

Banks Presnall thought of the wild turkey eggs that lay broken back up the trail yonder. He'd been packing them in his hat and Rob Tarver had slapped the hat to the ground, breaking them. The eggs didn't seem much important now.

He listened to old Hardy West answer the girl. "Yeah," the old man said. "He found something. He found Lake Spoons. Shot in the back of the head. Then Rob Tarver and a couple of hands found Banks standing over Lake's body and set out to hang him. Ranse claims they was fixing to ride in here then and slobber their grief over Banks killing Lake and how it riled 'em so bad they couldn't keep from hanging him!"

The girl's face whitened and her wide eyes flashed to the kid. They were black now, with fear. "Oh, Banks!" she said and the kid felt a warmth inside that began to loosen the hard cold knots in his belly.

Ranse Hunter turned and led his horse toward the corrals. There was a faint smile of amusement on his face. Banks Presnall understood why. Ranse was laughing at how he'd made old Hardy West turn such a quick handspring. Banks wished sometimes Ranse Hunter wasn't such a hard man. Then he thought of what had just happened to him, and he reckoned there were times when it paid to be a hard man.

Old Hardy West stood with his thumbs hooked in his gun belt, looking thoughtfully after Ranse Hunter. "Sometimes," he grumbled, "I think I made a mistake hiring that man."

The girl defended the gunman hotly. "But Dad! He's just saved Banks's life. If it hadn't been for Ranse—"

Her voice broke and she reached for one of Banks Presnall's hands. The kid felt his knees turn to water.

The old man saw the play and his eyes flashed angrily. "Go on up to the house, girl!" he commanded bluntly. "We've got trouble enough, like it is."

The girl looked up at the old man in surprise, then turned and walked slowly toward the house.

Banks Presnall turned and started to follow Ranse Hunter toward the corrals. Bosque Smith and Willis Day came around the corner of the house. Willis Day was saying, "If I'd drawed that Queen now—"

Hardy West said, "Lake Spoons has been shot. Ranse claims young Rob Tarver done it!"

The grins left the mouths of the two

riders. Their faces grew hard, tight lipped. Bosque Smith said, "I told you not to wait, Hardy. I told you Rob had hired that dirty killer Jess Devine and there'd be trouble!"

"I reckon we'll stir up some trouble of our own," the old man said.

The eyes of the two riders lit with eagerness. "Now you're talking, boss!" said Willis Day eagerly. "We'll run that two-bit outfit plumb off the Llano!"

Bosque Smith grinned at the kid. "If you got a gun, Rabbit, you better be oiling 'er up. The wolf's fixing to howl!"

Banks Presnall didn't answer. He led his horse on down to the corral and stripped off his gear. Then he leaned his elbows on the top rail of the corral and stood and stared out across the landscape for a long time. The kid was mighty sick inside. He reckoned if he had some place to get out of sight, he'd be crying, sure 'nough.

A couple of hours before sundown Sheriff Noah Ely and two deputies rode out from town. Banks Presnall rode with them and old Hardy West and Ranse Hunter to where Lake Spoons had been killed. The sheriff was a little hard-bitten man with red-rimmed, shifty eyes. He made a great show of having the kid go through the whole thing again. He had him show where he'd been sitting his horse when the shot was fired, then tell all that Rob Tarver had said and then what he'd said back. The sheriff questioned the kid severely, then turned to Ranse Hunter. He seemed mighty disappointed that he couldn't pin a little suspicion on Ranse Hunter.

The lawman fooled around, examining horse tracks in the trail and then under the live-oak where the hanging had been about to take place. Finally, he mounted and rode off, saying, "It's sure bad!"

Old Hardy West answered contemptuously, "Yeah. Ain't it, though?"

Before they got out of hearing, Ranse Hunter said: "Didn't I tell you that Ely and his poolroom deputies was owned by Rob Tarver?"

Not one of the three lawman looked back.

"Yeah," said Hardy West. "You told me, Ranse. I reckon it'll be up to us to git Rob Tarver."

IT WAS night when they got back to the ranch. Banks Presnall was sore and stiff from the way Rob Tarver had slammed him around. The rest of the bunch headed for the cook shack, but the kid pulled off toward the corral to put up his horse. There was too much misery inside him to think of food.

The men must have made it a mighty short snack, because by the time the kid reached the bunkhouse, Hardy West and Ranse Hunter were coming out from the cook shack again and swinging up into their saddles. The rest of the crew had already saddled and they followed the two outside and mounted, too.

Banks Presnall stood in the door of the bunkhouse and watched them. He thought he heard his name mentioned, then old Hardy West said: "We'll leave him here with Tommie and the cook."

Bosque Smith laughed shortly. "Hell of a lot of protection he'll be! Afeared to pack a gun."

The kid stood and watched the riders melt into the darkness, then heart-heavy and weary, he walked out toward the woodpile and sat down on a log. He felt the tears close again and cussed himself savagely. He heard pans ratting in the lighted cook shack. Lamplight streamed through a window at the main house and he saw a shadow he recognized as Tommie West cross in front of it. He reckoned maybe he ought to go hang around closer to the house. If trouble was coming, he didn't want it to touch the girl.

He got up and stiffened suddenly, dragging in a quick ragged breath. The sneering face of Jess Devine had moved out of the shadows into the path of light coming through the cook shack window.

Banks Presnall felt cold at the pit of his stomach. His knees trembled and he wanted to sit down. Jess Devine walked close to him, peering at him from light colored eyes. Devine poked him in the belly with his six-shooter, speaking very softly.

"Where's Hardy West?" he demanded.

The cruel eyes of the killer seemed to fascinate the kid. He couldn't look away from them for a moment. "He rode off with the rest of the crew," he finally answered.

Jess Devine rasped out savagely: "Where's Ranse Hunter?"

It wasn't the first time the kid had looked into a killer gun and he was beginning to get back his nerve. "Ranse is around somewhere," he lied.

But it didn't work. Jess Devine grinned at him. His heavy breath smelled strong of whiskey. "You oughta practice lying more, Rabbit," he said. "If old Hardy West rode out, Ranse Hunter rode with him!" He jabbed the muzzle of his gun deeper into the kid's belly. "Where'd they go?"

The kid sucked his belly away from the gun a little. He could see murder in those pale eyes. He thought: He's going to kill me! And then he thought of the girl in the house and a thousand other thoughts flashed through his brain—the good times they'd had together, her laughing brown eyes that had always reminded him of his mother's eyes, the way her brown hair blew down in her face sometimes when they rode in the wind together.

"I don't know," he said—and viciously slapped down at the gun.

He caught a wrist, wrenched desperately. There was a flash and a thundering roar in his ears and the hot burn of a bullet touching his ribs. Then he felt the killer's wrist twisting out of his grip and knew the sudden horror of death.

Somewhere a girl screamed. Then the gun crashed, in his face this time, and the world went out in shattering showers of flaming light. . . .

★

THE kid began slowly to wonder what made that curious light above him. His head ached intolerably and he lost interest in the light, slipping away again out of consciousness.

After a while, he noticed the light again. He thought about it a long time and concluded it was the reflection of firelight on the under side of a lacy-leafed mesquite. That, he thought, wasn't what he ought to be thinking about. But his head ached so he couldn't recollect what it was that his subconscious self told him was so urgent.

The murmur of voices came to him, the crackling of burning wood and the smell of smoke. A man laughed harshly. It came back then, with sudden clarity, and Banks Presnall tried to sit up. His hands, he found, were tied. The devastating pain in his head nearly made him faint again.

Then he thought, I'm not dead, and turned his head to one side. He could see the fire now and people sitting around it. It took him a long time to focus his pain-dimmed eyes. He saw Jess Devine standing up, the fire lighting up his sneering face and pale eyes. There were three men hunkered down on their bootheels beyond the fire. Then, quite close, the kid saw Rob Tarver and Tommie West.

His senses suddenly sharpened and the rumble of Rob Tarver's voice separated itself into words. Banks Presnall couldn't get all of them, but it was something about marrying, and Rob Tarver was talking to the girl. Tommie West's back was turned to him. The kid heard her say crisply and without fear, "Then why did you murder Lake Spoons?"

Rob Tarver protested in an injured tone. "You know better than that, Tommie. Rabbit Presnall killed Lake Spoons. Or Ranse Hunter!"

The girl said coolly, "You're a liar, Rob."

Rob Tarver ignored that and started talking about water and water rights and then about marrying again. "It'd settle a lot of trouble," he said, then added, "You got no call to be afraid of me, girl. I'd treat you right."

"I'm not afraid of you, Rob," the girl said calmly. "You're too near the end of your rope. You've overstepped yourself this time and there's no way out for you."

Rob Tarver jerked impatiently to his feet, swearing under his breath. "It's that damn' gutless horse wrangler!" he accused. "You were friendly enough before he came."

The girl said nothing to that.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Curly Wolf Wants a Gun!

ROB TARVER stood looking down at the girl and the firelight dancing in her hair. His little piggish eyes were wild with desire and his upper

lip curled and jerked with impatient eagerness. He sucked in a long breath and let it out in a gust, then stepped over to where the kid lay. He saw Banks Presnall looking up at him. He growled suddenly and kicked the kid in the ribs.

"The damn' pup's come to," he said. "Why didn't you finish the job, Jess, while you was at it?"

A man by the fire spoke up. "Ain't too late yet, is it, Rob?"

Rob Tarver kicked the kid in the ribs again, then turned and walked over to the fire.

Jess Devine grinned slyly. "Better keep billing and cooing with the girl, Rob. It's getting late."

Rob Tarver whirled on his gunman, vicious hate shining in his little eyes. He seemed about to explode, then snapped: "You talk too damn much, Devine. Go finish your job. Had no business bringing the kid along, anyhow."

"Maybe," said Jess Devine softly, "you better do your own killings from here on out, Rob. If you ain't satisfied. It's your war, remember!"

"Maybe you think I won't," the Slash T owner snarled.

He walked back over toward the kid, drawing his gun. The men by the fire turned their heads to watch. Their interest seemed to be only mild curiosity. Tommie West came to her feet in wild, panicky fright.

"Rob!" she gasped.

Rob Tarver halted. He grinned, wolf cunning gleaming in his little eyes. "I figured all the time," he said, "there was some way to drag that high-chinned pride out of you. Make up your mind!"

Banks Presnall kept swallowing till he found his voice. "Don't do it!" he croaked. "Don't promise him nothing for me, Tommie!"

They stayed like that for a long time, Rob Tarver with a gun in his hand, standing there looking at Tommie West. Waiting for the frightened girl to come through. Then Rob Tarver took his eyes off the girl and the click of his gun hammer thumbed back to full cock was loud in the breathless silence.

"Rob!" the girl shrieked, then a cool voice came from the darkness. "Drop that gun, Tarver!"

The kid recognized that voice. It was Ranse Hunter's. Cool and casual, but deadly, nevertheless.

"I said drop that gun, Tarver!"

The men by the fire froze into immobility. One of them muttered "Ranse Hunter" and Rob Tarver suddenly dropped his sixgun as if it were a live coal.

There was no sound of movement out there in the darkness, but a second later Ranse Hunter's voice came from a different direction. "Stand up," he ordered, "and shed that hardware."

The men rose slowly, cautiously, and reached carefully for belt buckles. Like a flash, one whirled and gun flame stabbed the darkness.

The answering shot was so swift its sound seemed to blend with that of the first. Jess Devine drew and fired at the second gun flash, then bolted into the darkness. Another man leaped out of the firelight and was gone. A minute later there came the noise of horses crashing through the brush and then the hoof hammering of horses running wildly.

The man who had shot first had pitched across the fire. The stench of burning flesh was horrible.

Ranse Hunter stepped into the circle of light and commanded: "Pull that thing out of the fire."

The kid found Tommie West bending over him, fumbling with the knots of the hogging strings that bound him.

Banks Presnall said gruffly. "Don't cry, Tommie. It's all right. There ain't nothing to cry about."

Ranse Hunter told the three men left to stand in a row, back to the fire, with their hands up. He reached down and picked up the gun belts they'd shed and brought one to Tommie West.

"Watch them snakes," he commanded.

She buckled the gun belt around her small waist and drew a six-shooter and held it on the three captives. The gun looked monstrous and ugly in her small hand. Ranse Hunter reached into his pocket and brought out a clasp knife. He cut the kid loose and helped him to his feet. He felt of the bullet wound across the top of the kid's head. The harshness of his face softened a little when he looked at the kid.

"Just a good hair part, kid," he said.

"You ain't bad hurt. Go see if you can locate a couple of horses."

The girl was looking down at them anxiously. "You sure he's all right, Ranse?" she asked.

"Watch them men!" Ranse Hunter snapped at her. He said to the kid, "Can you make it?"

"I can make it!" Banks Presnall answered.

But it was worse than he thought. A strange, giddy feeling assailed him the moment he stepped into the darkness. It seemed to him that he stumbled around all of ten minutes before he finally located a couple of horses and led them up to the fire.

"Now you two kids git on them horses and light a shuck for the ranch," Ranse Hunter said. "Make it a hurry-up case."

The girl said, "What are you going to do, Ranse?"

"You git on that horse and do like I tell you!" Ranse Hunter said.

The kid didn't question Ranse Hunter's orders. He tried to hold a stirrup for the girl, then lost his balance and fell. Ranse Hunter then backed up and gave him a boost into the saddle and told the girl to watch him, not to let him fall out of the saddle.

The two of them rode out through the mesquites. Banks Presnall looked back over his shoulder to the little firelit opening. He saw the three men standing with sagging shoulders, backs to the fire. Ranse Hunter stood with his toes almost under the dead man, staring at the men. The red light lit up the cold still face of him, giving it a merciless twist.

The kid heard Rob Tarver pleading: "I never give Devine orders for this job, Ranse."

Ranse Hunter smiled faintly. "I'll loan you a six-shooter, Rob," he taunted, "if you want to make a try."

BANKS PRESNALL didn't know where they were. He had to depend on the girl to find the ranch house. Seemed like he was having to depend on other people too often here lately. He didn't like it. But it looked like there wasn't much he could do about it under the set-up.

The girl rode beside him with a hand on his shoulder. From that hand there radiated a strange glowing warmth that went all through the kid. The horses picked their way down a long rocky slope. Loose rocks rolled under their feet. Brush dragged and rattled against the saddle gear. The night sky was alight with stars, but it was mighty dark there on the ground.

The girl said: "What'll he do, Banks?"

The kid felt a touch of jealousy that she should be so concerned about Ranse Hunter. Then he hated himself for feeling that way. Ranse was sticking with him, like he'd always done. Looking out for him. He had no call to resent the long-geared gunman, whatever he did.

"I don't know—for sure!" he said, and wondered just what sort of a game Ranse Hunter was playing this time.

They had entered a deep-cut canyon now and swung downhill, riding under tall trees. A voice came out of the darkness, a disgusted voice, close at hand.

"Hell! It's that damn' Rabbit Presnall!"

Old Hardy West said something and the girl's voice was a glad cry when she called out, "Dad!"

The horse the kid rode nickered and a group of riders pushed out of the thickets.

Old Hardy West's voice was a joyful shout. "Tommie!" He spurred his horse up close and swung out of the saddle. He reached up and pulled the girl off her horse into his arms, talking happily, ask-

Fred Gipson, author of this novel, has another compelling, human story of the West—a dramatic epic of two outcasts: a tough, cow-country waif and the only living being he called friend—his boss's prize saddle-horse! You won't want to miss "Outcasts of Blizzard Range," in the current DIME WESTERN. Buy it today, where ever good magazines are sold!

ing one question after another, ignoring Banks Presnall. The other riders sat their saddles close by and remained silent. The kid couldn't see their eyes in the dark but he felt as if they were all staring accusingly at him.

The girl told of the capture at the house, their trip to that high mesquite-covered bench, and how Ranse Hunter rescued them.

"Ranse Hunter!" exploded old Hardy West. "Less'n an hour ago, he told me to go to hell and quit me flat. Claimed I didn't trust him. Reckon he's playing a lone hand." Then he added: "I reckon he always was."

One of the riders said, "We better git up yonder, Hardy. They may still be there!"

"I aim to gut-shoot that Jess Devine!" declared another.

"We're a-going, all right!" said Hardy West. "But a couple of you boys will have to ride in with Tommie. The camp cook's dead. There won't be nobody there to look after her."

"There'll be Banks Presnall!" said Tommie West firmly.

Somebody snorted. Hardy West said sourly: "I left him there with you once tonight."

Then the old rancher turned suddenly on the kid and snarled: "Looks like you'd at least have the guts to fight for a girl!"

The girl cut in sharply. "Shut up, Dad! Banks did all anybody could have done. Jess Devine shot him in the head. It's a miracle he isn't dead!"

Hardy West grunted, stared at the girl, then at the figure of the kid sitting hunched and lonely in his saddle. Then he spoke irritably. "All right! All right! Ride on down to the house. We'll go on up yonder and circle back. Ought to be back pretty soon after you get there."

He got back on his horse, started to ride off, then said suddenly: "Day, you better ride on back with 'em."

Willis Day protested. "Hell no!" he said. "You ain't cutting me out of this party. Lake Spoons was a side-kick of mine."

Hardy West wheeled his horse impatiently. "All right. All right. Come on. We're wasting time."

The riders filed into the darkness and the kid could see the iron shod hoofs striking fire from the rocks.

The girl mounted and led the way on down the bed of the dry water course. She said soothingly, "You mustn't mind Dad. It's only when he's in trouble that he's like that."

The kid wished she'd put her hand back on his shoulder again.

"He's right!" he declared suddenly. "He's right and Ranse Hunter's right. I ought to be packing a gun."

"If I were afraid," said the girl, "do you think I would have stayed with you instead of going with dad and the boys?"

"That don't have nothing to do with it!" the kid said with savage fierceness. "If I'd had a gun, I could have killed Jess Devine when he jumped me. If I'd had a gun, I could a-blowed hell out of him and Rob Tarver when they found me standing over Lake Spoons's body. Pa was wrong. A man's got to pack a gun for an even break with the others. Hand me a gun, Tommie!"

The girl drew her horse aside at the sudden fierceness of the kid's speech.

He continued hotly: "The next confounded sneering dog that calls me Rabbit is going to find out he's tackled himself a curly wolf. Unbuckle that gunbelt and hand it to me!"

He could tell the girl was eyeing him with surprise. He swung closer and reached out to strip the gun belt from her waist. She beat him to it, jerked the belt loose—and flung it far into the darkness.

"There!" she said with finality. "Go find them, if you can!"

The kid pulled up his horse, astonishment taking the place of the hot resentment flooding his brain.

"I don't know," the girl said calmly, "why you had to put up with all the scorn and sneering and hoorawing dad's crew handed you and never fought back. But whatever it was, it had to be a good reason. So it's still a good reason and you're not throwing it over and turning killer now. Not while I can help it!"

The kid had never quarreled with a girl before. He didn't quite know how to go about it. He just sat there in his saddle and stared at the shape of Tommie West in the starlight, then finally touched spurs

to his horse. He reckoned he could dig up a gun at the ranch house somewhere. Somehow the girl's shrewd perception pleased him, yet made him slightly uneasy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blood-Bait for the Gun-Dog

THE gate was closed at the end of the lane leading to the house.

"I'll get it!" the girl said, and leaped down.

From out of the darkness beside the gate whipped a loop that settled and jerked tight around the kid's shoulders.

The kid yelled once, "Run!" and then was yanked out of the saddle and rolled over and over in the dust of the road, the rope winding about him like a live thing. His mouth and eyes were filled with dust.

Out of the dust and horror, he heard a man yelling. "We've got him! We've got Ranse Hunter!"

The kid choked and spat and tried to struggle, but two men had piled on top of him. They caught his hands together and threw hog knots in the rope about them, one getting up to set his foot against the kid's hands and jerking the rope hard. Like a cowhand makes his tie on a steer he's roped.

The kid looked wildly around for Tommie West and felt a surge of joy at not finding her.

One of the men yanked him to his feet and slapped his face.

"We got you, Ranse!" he bawled. "You figure yourself for a big curly wolf, but the wolf trap's sprung now."

Another voice spoke up. "Wait a minute! You right certain of your catch? He looks short to me!"

It was Jess Devine's voice. The gunman fastened clawlike fingers in the rope around the kid's shoulder and yanked him away from the shadow of a snorty horse, out into the starlight. Then the killer stood there with his hand on the ropes, staring at the kid. His jaw dropped in utter astonishment. Then his lips curled back from yellow teeth.

"It's that damn' Banks Presnall!" Jess Devine said.

The kid was laughing in the killer's face when Jess Devine drew back and slapped him hard across the mouth.

A short, heavy man came up and peered into the kid's face. "But, hell, Jess," he complained. "It was Ranse Hunter's horse. I recognized him by that stocking leg!"

It was the first time the kid realized he'd been riding Ranse Hunter's horse. He licked the warm salty blood from his lips and wondered what had happened to Tommie West.

Jess Devine slapped the kid's face again, almost blinding him with pain. "Where'd Ranse Hunter go?" he demanded.

The kid swayed on his feet. He thought he saw a third man there in the darkness. "I don't know," he said.

Jess Devine mimicked him. "'I don't know! I don't know!' You rabbit-gutted thing. I'll see if I can't prod you recollection a little!"

The cold menace in Jess Devine's voice frightened the kid. He swallowed blood and shivered. The gunman came toward him, walking with little slow steps that seemed to carry a horrible menace.

Tommie West spoke up. She spoke from behind a tree a little behind Banks Presnall. "Stop it, Jess!" she ordered. "I've got a gun!"

The kid's brain was whirling. Where had she come by a gun? Sneaked one out on him, he reckoned, when she threw that belt away. And now she was taking Ranse Hunter's place. Stepping in to save his scalp for him.

For a moment, the kid almost resented the girl.

He turned and could see the girl now, coming slowly out of the darkness, a six-shooter in her hand.

She spoke to Jess Devine and the fat man again. "Keep those hands up!"

She came up behind the kid and started fumbling with the ropes with her left hand. It seemed to take an interminable time for her to find the knots. Fiber rasped softly as she pulled ropes through loops.

Then, without warning a third man lunged into them from behind, knocking them off their feet. The girl screamed and struggled and the six-shooter went off. Tommie West was fighting furiously.

She bit a thick wrist savagely and a man squalled with pain and rage. Then Jess Devine and the fat man mixed in the fracas. They disarmed the girl and flung her face down into the road dust.

The kid struggled frantically with the ropes, but there was no give to them. He rolled then, rolled over and over, across the road. But Jess Devine saw what he was up to and came running and cursing. He kicked the kid in the ribs.

"Now, roll back," he snarled.

He kicked the kid again and Banks Presnall felt a sharp stabbing pain in his chest. He started rolling back and Jess Devine kept kicking him, to hurry up the job.

"Git a rope on that gal," the killer ordered the others. "Bring her up to the house."

He yanked the kid to his feet and started pushing him up the lane toward the house. The fat man had the girl caught in his arms and was half-dragging her ahead. The third man caught up the reins of Ranse Hunter's big bay.

"I always wanted me a good horse like this'n," he said.

"Yeah, but you'll play hell gitting him," said Jess Devine. "I'm keeping that horse. Bring him here and grab this kid. Take him on up to the house. We'll wait for 'em there. They won't figure on that. We'll hole up till they come and wipe the nest clean!"

"Why'n the hell," complained the man, "should you git the horse instead of me?"

"Because," said Jess Devine softly, "you ain't got the guts to keep me from taking him away from you."

They went along the lane under the tall live-oaks. The kid's head was aching again and it hurt him to breathe. Up ahead, he could see the fat man and Tommie West clearly. Daylight was coming fast.

★

LIGHT shone from a window in the ranch house and the kid's hopes lifted. Maybe old Hardy West and his bunch had come in and were waiting there now. Then fear gripped him. Maybe the old rancher was there and didn't know who was coming up the lane. The outfit would be caught with their pants down, killed off without a chance to fight back. What would become of the girl then? He thought he ought to call out a warning.

He gave that up, however. Jess Devine and his men could see the light, too. They wouldn't be walking along so boldly if they thought any of the Bar W outfit was in the house. He reckoned maybe they'd left the light burning themselves.

A man came to the doorway and complained. "Where's Rob Tarver? Why'n the hell don't he help fight his own wars?"

"Rob'll be along," Jess Devine told him. "Duke claims Ranse Hunter fist-whipped hell out of Rob up yonder on that bench and set him afoot. Rob's lucky to git out without a dose of lead poisoning."

Another man came to the door, then stepped back to let the newcomers in.

Jess Devine said: "Put 'em in chairs and tie 'em up so they can't move."

They tied the kid and the girl in chairs, drawing the ropes so tightly on the kid that it cut off his circulation. He found that he could look out a window down the lane. As he watched, there came a swift rush of light over the ridges. For an instant the sun glinted in his eyes and his head still ached and the dried blood on his face drew the skin so taut that it itched. He turned his head to look at the girl. She was looking at him. There was fright in her eyes, but a sort of confidence in them, too. Confidence in him. Like she still thought he could open up his bag of tricks any time and get them out of this. He looked quickly away. He felt as if he was about to cry again.

The fat man swaggered over to the lamp and blew it out. The kid looked back down the lane and out of the corner of his eye caught a flicker of movement. He turned his head swiftly and his heart began to pound. Then he looked away. He didn't want the men to see what he saw.

He sat there in an agony of suspense, wondering how long before one of Jess Devine's men would happen to glance down the lane. They had been watching and listening and prowling around through the house and looking out of all the windows. But now that there was something to see, they apparently didn't notice it. But the kid knew this couldn't last long.

He kept his eyes averted and started squirming and struggling against the ropes. He worked for a long time, but the ropes wouldn't give. Finally, he gave up and turned to stare down the lane, but doing his best to keep from showing interest in what he saw.

There was a man on a horse down yonder at the gate. It was Ranse Hunter. The kid stifled an urge to call out a warning. If Ranse Hunter came on alone up the lane nothing on earth could save him from getting shot out of the saddle. Then the kid remembered that the big bay was still standing outside the door. Ranse Hunter would see that. He would think the kid and the girl were in the house and he'd come riding on up, not looking for trouble.

I got to do something! he thought. *I got to do something!*

But Ranse Hunter wasn't riding on up the lane. He was sitting his horse there by the gate and leaning down to study the ground. He never even looked toward the house.

Then behind the kid, Jess Devine suddenly began swearing in an undertone. "Come on up here, you big gun-dog," he snarled. Evidently, he'd seen Ranse Hunter. "Just a little closer and I'll blow a hole in your belly a dog could jump through."

The fat man said casually: "Better not shoot him, Jess. I'll bet old Hardy West and his bunch ain't far behind and a shot'll spring the trap too quick. That outfit'll scatter like a sheepherder's brains." He thought the matter over a little and added: "We got to git Ranse up to the house here, some way."

Jess Devine turned on the fat man, mouthing curses. "How'n the hell," he snarled, "would you trick that long-geared devil up here? He's reading our sign down yonder right now. Ranse Hunter's smarter'n a sheep-killing dog!"

The fat man chuckled. "How about the kid?" he asked. "Maybe he'd like to be the bait. We could turn him loose and he could walk around the house like everything was peaceful as a Sunday school class. Hunter'll see him and forgit to be cautious and come riding up."

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Jess Devine stared at the fat man, thinking it over. Suddenly that sly look came into his light eyes and he started jerking the ropes off Banks Presnall.

"Git out there, kid!" he ordered. "Do what Fatty says!"

He grabbed a handful of shirt over the kid's chest and jerked him to his feet, shaking him and glaring at him murderously. "Make one wrong move," he added, "and I'll blow your head off your shoulders. And if you don't git Ranse Hunter up here, you'll git it just the same!"

The kid swayed and stumbled, then regained his balance. The blood began surging down through his legs and his feet were a prickling torture. He stepped slowly toward the door.

There he halted suddenly at the suppressed swearing of one of the men at the window.

"It's the old he-wolf!" the man exclaimed. "Old Hardy West and his bunch!"

CHAPTER SIX

Sons of the Dead

JESS DEVINE shoved the kid on out the door. "Git out there, damn you!" he whispered. "Walk around natural. Git 'em all up here in close gun-range. We don't aim for a one to git clear!"

Just beyond the gate, the kid could see that the road was full of riders. Old Hardy West was there, his bunch behind him. The old man was talking to Ranse Hunter.

The kid glanced back into the room and his eyes met those of the girl. She still sat there, tied in the chair. He lost himself for a second in her wide brown eyes. He reckoned this would be his last sight of her. Then he turned and walked out into the morning sunlight.

The kid knew now what he had to do. It seemed a long, long way to where the live-oaks stood beside the lane. A long way and a lonesome way. He could maybe make it to those trees, but he'd never make it back.

He would, he knew, simply walk on down the lane. He wouldn't try to call out a warning. No use. It was too far for the men to understand. He'd just head for those trees and he'd keep right on walking. And then somewhere between the house and those trees Jess Devine and his bunch would catch on to what he was pulling and cut him down with a slug in the back. Then Ranse Hunter and old Hardy West would understand. They wouldn't ride into the death trap. They'd keep clear till they found an opening. Then they'd come helling in, guns blasting, wiping out those cold-blooded snakes. That wasn't the way a man saved his woman in the stories he'd read, but the kid reckoned it was the best *he* could do.

He walked slowly through the warm sunlight but he was shivering. He wished he could straighten up and walk forward boldly, with a laugh on his lips, like the heroes he'd read about. But he was scared. He was so scared that he could hardly get his breath. He could feel the muscles of his back crawling and bunching, as if they were trying to draw up into such hard tight knots that a bullet couldn't go through them.

There were mockingbirds singing in the tops of the live-oaks. The kid was surprised when he realized he had crossed the open space between the house and the trees and had to look straight up to see the birds. The trees and the birds seemed very friendly. Under the thorny mint bush that grew at the base of one tree sat the little brown chicken hen he and Tommie West had put on a clutch of quail eggs. He could see the little old hen watching him and drawing her neck back down into her feathers, hoping she wouldn't be noticed. It was about time the eggs were hatching. The kid found himself wondering if the little old hen would peck and fight him if he went and raised her up to look at the eggs.

Then a movement of the men at the end of the lane jerked his thoughts away from the hen. The men were watching him closely and he shook his head at them. He saw old Hardy West shove his horse forward and Ranse Hunter reach out and grab the bridle bits to stop the horse. Ranse Hunter was saying something to the old rancher.

A rider yelled sharply, wheeling his horse and clawing for a gun. The kid saw Ranse Hunter slap the head of Hardy West's mount and swap his own around

and to one side. There was a flashing movement of riders and horses wheeling out of the lane and disappearing into the trees.

With a gulp of hope the kid flung himself headlong into the mint bush where the little brown hen sat on the quail eggs while hot lead plowed into the dirt beside him.

The kid crashed through the bush, thorns tearing at his face and hands. Frantically, he rolled behind the hole of the tree, while the little brown hen quit her nest in squawking flight. The kid cringed and shrank and tried to be as small as nothing. A hail of bullets searched for him, ripping into the tree and showering him with fragments of flying bark. Then the crashing roar of guns and flail of bullets halted as suddenly as it had begun.

A rush of horses thundered up the lane. The kid thought: Why don't they stay in the trees?

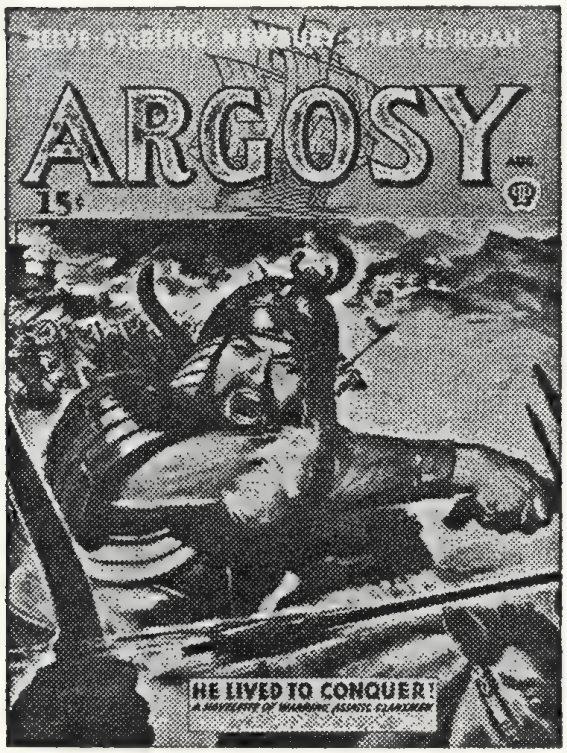
He came to his feet, keeping the tree between him and the house. He turned to see a bunch of men on running horses, men with hard, grim faces riding wildly, shouting and firing into the trees. The man in the lead was Rob Tarver!

It came to the kid in a flash. Rob Tarver and his bunch had come up behind the Bar W crew, aiming to crowd them into that murdering fire from the house. But the Bar W bunch had been spooked to cover and now Rob Tarver was heading for the house, aiming to join forces with Jess Devine.

★

FOR an instant the kid thought they hadn't noticed him. Then one of the tail-end riders jerked up a six-shooter and cut down on the kid. The blow of the bullet knocked Banks Presnall half around the tree he clutched.

For a long time, it seemed, he could only cling to the rough bark of the tree. Then he knew this was it. He was shot. Cold rage shook him. All reason, all timidity, all hope was gone now. He staggered away from the tree and staggered toward the house. Bosque Smith came



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running up behind him, a Winchester clutched in his hands.

"Hold it, you crazy fool!" Bosque Smith shouted. "Where're you going?"

The kid turned on Bosque Smith with a snarl. "Damn you!" he raged. He snatched the rifle out of Bosque Smith's hands.

Bosque Smith's face flamed with rage. He clawed for his six-shooter. Then he grinned suddenly. "All right, Rabbit," he said. "Have at 'er. Give 'em hell! I'm right on your tail!"

The kid thought, I'm shot. I'm fixing to die. I kept my promise to pa, but now it don't matter no more if I turn killer. I can kill ever' one of them hounds and it don't make no difference now!

He was crying a little, but that didn't make any difference, either.

He ran ahead of Bosque Smith and the rest of the Bar W outfit. He fell once and put all his mind on having to get up and go on. Guns were opening behind him now. He came to the edge of the trees nearer the house and saw before him a milling mass of horses and men. Rob Tarver sat on a horse and was shouting in hoarse excitement. The man called Fatty came out of the house with Tommie West under one arm. He tossed the girl across Ranse Hunter's big bay as a man would load a sack of stock salt.

More men came boiling out of the house, guns in their hands, grabbing the whipping bridle reins of plunging horses. A man slapped a Winchester to his shoulder and held still a second, taking careful aim. Then he lowered the rifle as if it were too heavy to hold. A foolish expression crossed his face as the gun fell out of his hands. Then he pitched forward on his face.

A bullet burned the rump of Ranse Hunter's big bay horse, spooking him. He tore loose from the man holding his reins and lashed out with both back feet, whirling and clearing a space around him. Then he bolted, headed for the lane.

The fat man laid his six-shooter across his arm, aiming with care. Jess Devine squalled. "Don't shoot that horse. He's mine!"

Banks Presnall was out of the trees now, close. So close he couldn't miss. He swept the saddle gun to his shoulder and shot the fat man between the eyes. Deliberately, he swung his sights around to cover Jess Devine who was mounting a horse. The kid waited till the killer was in the saddle and let him have it. A black-bearded rider chopped a shot at him from a wildly plunging horse. The kid emptied that saddle, too.

Behind him, he heard Bosque Smith shouting, "That damn' fool Rabbit's gone hawg wild!" The kid grinned flatly, levering a smoking shell out of his gun and sliding a fresh cartridge into the chamber.

The outlaw bunch was quitting the house, swinging round a pole corral, trying to get out back. The kid felt himself weaving in his tracks. He dropped to one knee, while hot lead kicked sand and gravel in his face. The kid blinked his eyes and missed a shot. He got a horse instead of its rider. The horse went down and a man screamed as the animal fell across him.

Then suddenly the outfit was gone, leaving Rob Tarver standing beside a dead horse in the open space before the open door. Rob Tarver leaped across the horse, heading for that door.

"Hold it, Tarver!" shouted the kid.

Rob Tarver didn't stop. But he swung around, running sideways, shooting at the kid with his six-shooter. The kid's saddle gun bounced against his shoulder. His lead caught Rob Tarver off balance and whirled him half through the open door. The man's knees drew up, then kicked back convulsively. When he slumped and was still, he still lay half inside the door, head down, rump high, like a praying Oriental.

The kid sat down on the dusty ground and laid the rifle away very carefully. He looked stupidly at the dead bodies of the men he'd killed. He shivered slightly and suddenly he was sick. . . .

When he looked up again there was the shadow of a man over him.

The kid said: "They got me, Ranse. I'm blowed all to hell and gone. That's how come I done it. I didn't aim to go back on my word to pa, but I knowed I was a goner and I aimed to wipe the slate clean before I went."

He looked hopefully up into Ranse Hunter's eyes, wanting desperately for him to understand that he hadn't aimed

to go back on his word. But seemed like he couldn't see the tall gunman any more. Things were getting too black. . . .

★

IT SEEMED he was out just a minute, but when he woke up he was on a bed and all one side was a stiffening mass of pain. Somebody was washing his face with a cool damp cloth. He couldn't get his eyes open, but he could tell who it was by the feel of her hands. It was Tommie West. Somewhere, he could hear the hard, crisp voice of Ranse Hunter talking.

"I'll tell you why he done it!" Ranse was saying. "His old man was Jim Presnall. One of the toughest gunmen that ever follered the outlaw trails. Jim was forced into a couple of killings. Talk got out that he was a fast man with a gun. He was fast, and every glory-hunting gun-dog and bounty-hunter in New Mexico went after his scalp, making him prove how fast he was. They finally put him outside the law. His woman tried to stay with him. Taking the kid along. Some dirty rat finally shot her in bed, thinking he was getting Jim.

"After that, Jim and the kid took to the outlaw trail in earnest. Them two made plenty of tracks along the owlhoot. But the kid was getting about as fast with his guns as Jim. Jim could see what was in store for him. So the night he died from a bushwhacker's bullet in the back, he made the kid promise never to touch a gun again. Told him to take anything that come, but leave them guns alone. I was there and I told Jim it wouldn't work. But he made the kid promise. And the kid's kept his word up till now."

Ranse Hunter's voice grew harsh, accusing: "You damn' tough hands figured the kid for a white-livered coward. You rawhided him and joshed him and treated him like he was dirt under your feet. The kid taken it, 'cause that's what he'd give his word to do. But let me set you straight right now. The kid don't want trouble. He'll put up with a lot to dodge it. He's too sensitive and too big-hearted. But if it hadn't been for that promise he'd made his pa, he could have taken a corn cob and a lightening bug and run ary one of you tough hands till you dropped dead from scare."

The kid could hear a whiskey jug gurgling. He heard Ranse Hunter smack his lips and say: "You seen him with a saddle gun. Hell, you ought to face him once with a Colt six-shooter in his hand. I'd give a purty to see that once!"

The kid heard the awed voice of Bosque Smith. "How bad's he shot up, Ranse? You reckon he'll pull through?"

Old Hardy West snorted. "Pull through, hell! You couldn't kill his kind with a double-bitted axe. Hand me that jug, Bosque, before you kill it. You know too much red-eye puts snakes in your boots!"

The kid finally managed to raise his eyelids. The face of Tommie West floated in a white cloud above him. He couldn't see it very plain, but her shining eager eyes were clear and distinct. He let his heavy lids fall. He guessed his old man would have understood how he came to break his promise. If he could have seen what Banks Presnall was seeing in those brown eyes of Tommie West. . . .

THE END

Yesterday for Defense . . . Today for Survival . . . Tomorrow for Victory!

Let's not kid ourselves! The War is still a long way from being won, and in one sense we are just getting into it. Perhaps by the time you read this, our sons, brothers and friends will be engaged in fighting the most desperate military action in the history of the world. . . . And more than ever they'll urgently need the help that *you* can give them by buying, each pay-day, a U.S. War-Savings Bond, the money from which can be used to furnish planes, tanks and guns for those who are risking their lives for all of us! *Invest in Freedom—Buy War-Savings Bonds!*

DEATH-SONG OF THE FLYING J

By TOM ROAN

Kind-hearted Old Dad Langly hadn't an enemy in the world, yet that didn't save him from the hidden, bushwhack death, which so strangely was marked for every God-fearing man—ranch-owner and cow-hand alike—in the wide, wild Devil's Bugle country, where the first to shoot was the last to die!

CHAPTER ONE

Death Hits the Slope

THE sudden, unexpected crash of the rifle over the valley was like the harsh stroke of a many-toned bell in the lowering sunshine. Blending into the noise, but almost obliterated by the resurging echoes, was a piercing cry that might have come from a stricken wild animal, and then it drowned out in a fierce beat of hoofs racing away.

The long-legged bay horse, coming up the trail beside West Horn Creek, stopped abruptly, head up, ears cocked. The slumped figure of the big, broad-shouldered man in the saddle straightened as if a ramrod had been slid up his

"They waited until big poker stakes was on the table, then they come in with drawn knives....

Stirring Range-War Novel

back, and a look of wonder filled his blue eyes. For a moment he caught himself, taking frowning notice that his right hand had slid to the butt of the long old Colt hanging in its worn belt-holster.

Wide-awake now after having been in the saddle since three hours before dawn to finish a tough Saturday job, Dave Jackson sat staring up the slope of Lone Indian Hump. That great ridge split Lone Basin into two big, well-watered valleys at the foot of the Devil Bugles, which finally ended against a towering mountain wall in the west.

Old Dad Langley, cow-boss of the Flying J, had left the branding corrals only a short time before Jackson had left them. Riding his tall Steamboat—a faster horse than Dad's old flea-bitten gray—Jackson had been expecting to overtake him before this. But on this raw spring day, Old Dad liked to ride the slope where it would be warm, up among the jackpines and knolls. Jackson's first thought was that the old man—coming up against the wind—had jumped a wolf or coyote.

Another shot came now, but it was the dull report of a six-shooter sounding as if it had been fired close against the ground, and Jackson restiffened again, recalling that Old Dad had not been carrying a rifle today. When the third shot came, evenly spaced between the first and second, it was enough to make any Westerner's blood quicken with alarm. That was a signal that meant trouble in any big stretch of far-flung country.

Thunder, the big black, husky dog traveling with Jackson, arose with a jump and swung ahead when Jackson spurred toward the jumble of rimrocks up there where the shots had sounded. At a point three hundred yards above the creek Jackson saw Dad's flea-bitten gray ahead through the trees.

The dog was standing and whining where the old man lay when Jackson pulled his snorting horse to a quick halt. For twenty-four years, from the first day he had opened his eyes as a baby, Dave Jackson had known Dad Langley as the one never-failing friend always at his right hand.

People from everywhere, it seemed, were constantly bringing their troubles to the old man to get them peacefully settled. If he had an enemy in the world no one could name him. But now Dad Langley lay there, the stubble of gray beard on his face streaked with blood at either side of his mouth. His left hand still hung like a gnarled talon fastened into a fierce grip on his reins, and his lean old body in dusty blue was stretched out at full-length. Thunder was standing over him, one foot poised lightly on the old chest, when Jackson leaped from his saddle to the ground.

Langley's eyes were dull, listless. Three long, smoke-blackened streaks showed that he had fired his old Colt from flat against the ground to send out his distress-call to every rider within hearing distance. On his chest and running to the pit of his stomach was a slowly widening smear of red.

"Good God, Dad, what happened!" Jackson was on his knees beside him. "Who shot you?"

The faded gray eyes turned in their sockets. For a moment they were startlingly clear. The blood-smeared lips moved, and Jackson quickly lowered his head, the better to hear. When Langley spoke, his voice was a faint, far whisper that might have come all the way from the tops of the Cradle Rock, that black, snow-capped mountain chain forming along the western wall of the Lone Basin Country.

"It's come, Dave! Tell yore Granpa an' yore Granny. . . ."

"Yes, Dad, yes!" Jackson looked at him through suddenly swimming eyes. "What will I tell them, Dad?"

The lips finally moved again, but the strength was rapidly failing. "Never drawed a gun on a man in my life. Never had to hit one. Been mighty proud of my rep'. Granpa Johnny Jackson an' his ol' Nancy give me the only home I ever had. Forty years or so ago, 'twas, when I come. Don't worry 'bout my pay, Johnny. . . ."

The whispering was rambling all at once. "I got all I need right here. Peace among men, good vittles an' a clean place to sleep. There was a long silence, and then: "The ear-count shows we've branded forty-four. Not bad, boys, not bad, Wouldja pass the water-jug, Squinty?"

Jackson squatted there, eyes misty as the old head had turned to one side. The thin smile on Old Dad's lips would be there until they laid him in the ground. The eyes faded. . . .

Dave Jackson arose, taking off his hat. He stood for almost a minute with his head bowed. Then a low growl from Thunder made him suddenly look up.

★

THUNDER was a dog that never growled, never bristled without some good cause, despite the wolf strain in his blood, which seemed only to sharpen his wits. New men who came to ride for the Flying J found that it took no time at all to make friends with him. A new cowboy shivering in his blankets during cold nights on the range often found him coming up and piling down beside him. Men anywhere would share one side of a blanket with him. On cold nights—and they were cold even in midsummer in this high, wide country—it was like having a warm fur rug snugged up against one's back.

No rattlesnake that ever crawled on its belly could slow-wiggle into a sleeping man's blankets to take shelter from the cold. Not with big black Thunder there, asleep with one eye open beside the man!

The dog had turned and moved a dozen feet away from the body of the old man. Every bristle was up now. The coppery eyes had a mean glint in them. When he growled again, Jackson heard hoofs sound in the distance.

"Easy, Thunder. Easy."

The dog quietly moved back to his favorite spot against the tall Steamboat's forelegs. Tail flung around his rump, he sat there without another sound, but the mean glint in those keen, coppery eyes had not faded.

Only one man in the country could make Thunder act like that, and Jackson

knew who was coming down the slope before the rider was in sight. When the man appeared he was about twenty-six and dressed like a circus king on a coal-black horse. He was tall and lean and hatchet-faced. His garb was as black as his Indian-straight hair and his horse's coat. Around his middle rode a pair of cartridge belts shining with gold and silver spots, and at each hip was a lavishly engraved .45, plated with silver. No hard-working cow-puncher could have afforded a fine turn-out like that—if an honest cowboy could be found who would want such a get-up.

Very few men found it an easy matter to like Pride Rainey, first son by the pretty little squaw wife of sour old Anse Rainey, owner of the Bleeding Heart, the big ranch on the east side of Lone Indian Hump.

A big, red-headed cowboy had once hammered sour Anse half to death for beating his woman, the tale ran, and later the cowboy and the pretty squaw had disappeared, leaving the two-year-old Pride behind. Four years later, Anse Rainey had managed to marry again.

For a moment Pride Rainey sat there staring down at the body of Old Dad Langley, then at Thunder watching him from the shelter Steamboat's front feet and legs.

"Fell off his horse, I guess," Rainey said. "Too old to ride, but the Flying J, I'm told, drives men like that."

"You're a liar, Pride." Jackson's voice was flat. "Nobody says that about the Flying J, but it's said plenty about the Bleeding Heart. Somebody killed Dad!"

Rainey swung out of his saddle. "You're dead wrong Dave." Then he stopped, his coal-black eyes on Thunder. "That infernal wolf of yours doesn't like me. One of these days I'm going to drop a couple of slugs in him—"

"And then," nodded Jackson, "when you get through, I'll throw so much lead in you that you'll just sink in the ground." He shook back his broad shoulders. "I'll just say that I'm glad to see that you're not carrying a rifle."

"If you—if you even hint that I shot him," Rainey's right hand rested on the Colt butt, "then, by God, I'll kill you, Dave! You know damned well I wouldn't hurt even a hair on Old Dad's head."

A cold smile twisted Jackson's grim mouth. "I was only saying that you have no rifle. I heard the rifle that killed Dad. He was able to fire three slow shots. You must have heard them."

Rainey appeared to relax. "Sure. That's the reason I came on down this side of the ridge. You know I liked the old cooter, and I'm sorry to see this happen to him. . . . But now that you seem to have things in hand I'll drift back where I belong." He caught the horn of his saddle and swung up.

He was about to wheel his horse away, but he paused, black eyes flashing. "I hope you make it a point to mention that I didn't have a rifle when you start this tale over the country.

"You might take things a little easier. Everybody thinks you're going to marry that red-headed step-sister of mine, and picking quarrels with me won't help things along. She might get some sense in her infernal pretty head one of these days—and tell you to go to hell!"

He was gone before Jackson could answer him.

Jackson turned back to look down the valley. Below him, eight horsemen were coming along at a lazy canter with a slow cloud of dust rising behind them. In the lead rode a tall old man on a tall gray.

Man and horse looked a part of each other. The man was garbed in battered gray. His white hair and his great white mattress of beard bannering in the wind.

Jackson lifted his Colt, and fired three slow, precise shots into the air. The horsemen jammed their mounts to a halt. Jackson saw a puff of smoke jerk from the muzzle of a Peacemaker in the old man's right hand. Then the horsemen were on the move again down there, coming forward in a fast gallop, the dust cloud now a swirling banner in the wind.

Granpa Johnny Jackson was the first to get there. A man more than eighty years old, he swung out of his saddle with the agility of a leaping goat. Dropping his reins and hitching up the old belt of his Colt and his chaps, he came forward, eyes staring like blue coals of fire as he slowly dragged off his hat.

"Stars, Dave!" he croaked as the other riders were thundering up behind him

and piling down. "Boy, what's happened to pore ol' Ben Langley?"

"Somebody shot him, Granpa."

"Dad *shot!*" Somebody ripped out in the gang. "An accident?"

It was like showing hungry lions raw meat for the next few minutes. Hat off, old head a glistening ball of silver in the sunlight, Granpa Johnny was on his knees. Every man's hat had come off. A little cowboy, Squinty Miller, stooped and was trying to pull the ends of the long reins from the dead man's hand.

"Wait," Squinty," whispered a big, bald-headed cowpuncher, laying a quick hand on the reins. "Granpa's prayin'."

CHAPTER TWO

Gunfire in the Dark

IT TOOK a long time for old Johnny Jackson to get up. Ben Langley—Old Dad to almost everybody in the country—had been his friend for all those years that had slipped into the background.

Only his lips moved as Johnny Jackson prayed. His eyes were closed, face lifted to the sky. There were no dry eyes in th crowd when the old man bowed his head as a signal that he was through.

Dave Jackson told them all he could, his voice husky as he glanced from face to face. When he mentioned the coming of Pride Rainey, men turned, glowering up the ridge in the direction Rainey had gone.

A big, red-nosed cowboy called Wyoming Sam McGee threw his old brown hat on the ground and stamped his booted foot upon it.

"Maybe he didn't have that three-hundred-dollar rifle on his saddle when yuh saw 'im," he snarled, "an' maybe he didn't do this thing a-tall, but I still feel blame agin 'im somewhere. Ol' Dad used to say Anse wasn't so bad til that jackass Pride got outa hand, an' Pride's been gettin' worse an' worse since he took that train-load of cattle to Chicago a year ago. He come back to Purple Cross with a bunch of stockyard rowdies in tow that I guess Chicago was glad to get rid of—people who ain't our kind of people a-tall. They ain't made good in Purple Cross.

"Look!" he pointed up the ridge. "We used to drive our cattle through that break to Purple Cross, eleven miles straight to the shippin' pens at the railroad tracks. Last fall ol' Anse made us go 'round the foot of this Lone Indian Hump to keep us from cuttin' 'cross his range. Miles an' miles clear outa the way. I figure we oughta go in an' wipe out that whole damn' Bleedin' Heart bunch. How'd Anse get the south half of it if it wasn't by marryin' Tom Rainey's widow? Tom would never have pulled this kind of a deal, even on a hoss-thief!"

"Yuh run off too much at the mouth, Wyomin'." Granpa Johnny got to his feet slowly. "Talk an' violent acts won't bring Ol' Ben back. This could have been one of them accident things, that a man with a rifle didn't aim—"

"Dave said he heard a hoss go runnin' off!" Wyoming Sam glared at him. "Then—then, later, Pride comes up like the dude he tries to be. Why, Granpa Johnny, if a man had done it by accident, then a *man* wouldn't run, would he?"

"We'll get the body on his hoss." Granpa Johnny looked at the flea-bitten gray as Squinty Miller at last freed the reins. "It's too bad Dave wasn't closer. Maybe he could have seen who it was that dashed off all so sudden. That ball, now, it hit Ben in the chest an' sorter ranged down, tearin' 'im all apart inside."

"Some of yuh boys will scatter an' spread the news." He glanced up quickly, looking searchingly from face to face. "A lot of folks are goin' to be hot in the collar about this, but I don't want anybody talkin' fight talk. . . . 'Count ten before yuh cuss or say bad things about yore fellowman," Ben would say, "an' then yuh won't say 'em. We'll bury 'im tomorrow at sundown. I'll make his coffin myself in the blacksmith shop."

Wyoming Sam jerked up his left hand. "Somebody else is comin'—or that jackass Pride's just fool enough to be comin' back! I feel like bustin' my fist in somebody's ugly face, an' Pride's got the face I'd like to hit."

"Not Pride." Tongue River Pete, a tall half-breed Indian answered him. "It Big George, Pride step-brother. Him good man. Him treat Indian with straight tongue."

Big George Rainey was garbed in dusty blue and riding a rangy old black and white-spotted "buzzard head" horse, a rack-a-bone brute of the kind men could buy all over the West from ten to fifteen dollars.

A big, rusty-haired man, he pulled up and slipped quickly out of his saddle. Every man in the group nodded to him, and no one any more than glanced at the old coyote rifle hanging in its ragged boot on his battered saddle.

"I heard the shots," he groaned when they had told him what had happened. "I was up there on top, drivin' a couple of yore strays back over to yore side of the range. Somebody," his voice thickened, "has killed the best man in this country. There'll be trouble over this, for sure."

Big George was right there to help them when they loaded the body on the gray. No one needed to invite him to ride in to the Flying J for Big George was a man who could come and go anywhere, at any old time the notion struck him. His mother and Dale, his red-headed sister, had taught him to read and write when Pride, the step-brother, had been lodged in Purple Cross so that he could go to school.

"Shorty Knight, now," Granpa Johnny held up his hand as he swung back into his saddle, "he'll ride south to the Rattlebone an' let Steve Clayton an' his folks know. Some of the Rattlebone boys may still be back down yonder at the corrals.

"Charley Martin will head west for the Broken Bow."

He nodded his head toward the Cradle Rock and the big ranch. "Squinty, yo'll ride for Purple Cross to tell Long Jim Fargo about this. Ever'body's goin' to want to come, an' they'll feel madder'n hornets if they ain't told. Tell Lige Tucker about it down at the telegraph office. I'll bet money people will be comin' up that eighty miles from South Bend on the Sunday mornin' train. Ben Langley had friends—an' God he'p the man who done this if people get their hands on 'im!"

They rode on, and were soon within sight of the Flying J's log-and-pole corrals, the long, low old ranch house in a riotous grove of cototnwoods and bushy weeping willows on a high bank just east of the creek canyon. A wide bridge made of earth-covered logs spanned the seventy-foot deep chasm. The barns, the sheds and corrals were on the west side of the creek.

★

OLD DAD LANGLEY had loved every yard of the Basin, and now his work showed everywhere when they rode up in front of the long porch of the stone-and-log house facing the creek. The long log hitchrack was a product of the old man's handy hands with carpenter tools. Leaves were already appearing on the vines he had carefully planted around the porch.

Grandma Nancy had come to the door. Wing Lee, the aged Chinese cook who had been with the Flying J for almost thirty years, appeared around the corner of the kitchen along the east side of the house. In a minute the woman was crying. Wing Lee had come closer, mopping tears from his wrinkled yellow cheeks.

It was only the beginning of people letting tears drop down their cheeks and not being ashamed of them. Darkness had come by the time they had laid Old Dad out in the big living room in his "buryin' clothes."

In no time at all riders were banging in out of the night, hard-looking men who galloped up at the hitchrack and flung out of their saddles. Silent, except for

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the thump of bootheels and spurs dragging on the floor, they filed in, hats in their hands.

They stood there in pairs and in bunches, taking a long look at the gaunt old face in the lamplight and firelight, then they turned, some of them going straight back outside, others heading for the kitchen and hot coffee or the Christmas whiskey keg Granpa Johnny had ordered placed on the long dining table.

Sheriff Long Jim Fargo arrived just after eight-thirty, riding a black and white-spotted horse that was almost a dead-ringer for the tall old buzzard head Big George Rainey had left at the hitch-rack. With a big Colt at his hip, he was tall, lean, gray-mustached, a keen-faced old hawk who had been county peace officer for nearly forty years.

"No, I musta passed yore Squinty Miller somewhere along the line," he growled when Granpa Johnny, Dave Jackson and Big George talked to him in a rear room. "Got the news from Pride Rainey. He musta just come bustin' right on into town. He was spreadin' the tale on thick, ever'where an' to ever'body. Last I saw of 'im he was in the Horned Owl buyin' drinks for the house an' chargin' 'em to his daddy."

"Then I'm goin' right home." Big George reached for his old hat on a little center table. "I figured Mom an' Dale would be here long before this. Uncle Anse couldn't tie them up an' keep them away!"

He turned back through the big room. Dave Jackson was standing by the window and heard Dave gallop away.

The sounds of the hoofs were dying away in the distance when the report of four shots came rolling up the creek.

"What the hell!" bawled a wild voice outside. "Somebody down the crick is shootin' at Big George."

"An' they got 'im!" roared another voice. "I heard 'im yell clear back here! Grab yore saddles an' let's *get goin'!*"

CHAPTER THREE

Sweat Tells a Tale

THUNDER got there first, a bounding streak that raced off the front porch and headed straight to that one yell of distress.

Dave Jackson threw up the window, leaped outside and raced for the nearest horse, with the sheriff following to jump for another horse. There was no unnecessary waste of time.

A crowd surrounded Big George Rainey and Thunder when Jackson and the sheriff flung up and out of their saddles in the dust. He pushed the crowd aside and peered at Big George.

Rainey was flat on his back, head toward the slope, the dog on the lower side of him, and a big, lantern-jawed Rattlebone cowboy had already lifted Rainey's limp head and shoulders into his lap. In the moonlight the cowboy was looking intently into the white, still face.

The cowboy did not as much as glance up from the white face. "He ain't a goner yet. Looks like he wants to say somethin' an' can't get his lips to workin'. He's tryin', though."

A quick examination of the man showed that one shot had raked him across the right shoulder. The dangerous wound was in his back. It was a bullet that had struck below the line of his hips and ranged upward along the spine, paralyzing him from head to foot with one lightning stab.

"Bullet hit his cantle," exclaimed the sheriff. "That turned it, slowin' it up. Get 'im to the house, an' somebody's got to burn wind for Purple Cross an' old Doc Neeley."

He turned to a tall cowboy, "Goode, yuh an' Bob Redfern hit leather. Tell Doc to leave that damned buggy of his behind an' hit a fast hoss with his tools an' his saddle bags. Get goin'! An' don't come back without that medico!"

"An' don't ride a spotted hoss!" put in a voice in the crowd. "It looks to me like them killers mighta thought they was shootin' to drop yuh outa the runnin', Sheriff."

Long Jim Fargo pushed back his old hat and scratched his head thoughtfully. "Yeah, come to think of it, maybe yuh are right, but I'm still standin' on my feet." Then, as he saw Jackson moving away: "Where yuh goin' with Thunder, Dave?"

"To try to find the place where the killers stood!"

Fargo and nine men followed him while others were hastily marking slings out of their coats and stout riding jackets in which to carry Big George back to the house.

Looking for the most logical place for gunmen to hide, Dave Jackson worked his way down through a break in the bank of the creek to a broad strip of sand along the edge of the stream.

"This is it!" he told the sheriff within a few minutes as he pointed to the sand in the grownig light. "Two horses! They would make scarcely a sound either coming up or getting away in that sand. Look how they came up. See those tracks? Now look at the others. They came up on the sneak, and they pulled out of here like shots from guns. Come here Thunder. Here, *here!*" He squatted on his heels, pointing to the tracks. The dog smelled of them, then looked up. "Follow them, Thunder! *Go get!*"

"Damn it, he's doin' it!" cried the sheriff, turning quickly back for his horse.

Jackson was running for his horse now, and so were others. All told, eleven men turned down the creek and soon saw the dog ahead of them. At the end of another eight hundred yards, Thunder was leaving the creek, nose still to the ground and his tail in the air. They followed him up the long, steep slope of the Hump, horses blowing and snorting as they tried to keep the pace.

A bloodhound would have sounded his trail cry at regular intervals, but Thunder was no bloodhound. Besides, he had never been trained for this kind of a job.

"It looks like," finally growled the sheriff, "that he's headin' straight toward the Bleedin' Heart, Dave. Will he follow a rider after he's quit his hoss?"

"He never has." Jackson's face had grown pale with expectation. "He's not really good at this. He'll find the horse, and be there with it when we catch up, but he doesn't know enough to go on beyond that."

"Bloodhounds," grunted the sheriff, "are a breed of critters all by themselves. I used to see 'em run in Mississippi when I was a boy. The good ones could trail a man up or down a river. He might even change hosses without lettin' his feet hit ground, an' still there was some what would go right on followin' their man.

"But—but this, now," he glanced back over his shoulder and tried to lower his voice, "don't look good. I'll swear we're headin' straight for old Anse Rainey's. Either Thunder's lyin' to us, or it's goin' to look bad when we get there. Reckon he thinks he's helpin' yuh go see yore purty red-head, Dave?"

"It's been months since I've set foot on the ranch, Sheriff!" Jackson glanced at him sharply. "I thought everybody in the country knew that old Anse and Pride ordered me off the place. I've been trying to do that the best I could."

"But seein' yore girl ever' Sunday, anyhow." The hint of a smile dragged itself across the old lawman's face. "An' that's just fine, I'd say yuh was a gutless fool if yuh didn't see 'er somewhere."

They soon came to the top of the Hump where they could look down on the east valley of the great basin. Men who had been in the country only a few times could easily mistake the Bleeding Heart for the Flying J. The ranch houses, corrals, barns and sheds looked almost the same. Old Dad Langley's handwork could be seen here, too. He had helped Anse Rainey do a lot of his planning through the years that were always peaceful between the two ranches.

Jackson had many memories buried down there. George Rainey had always been like a brother to him. A mean horse had killed Big George's father. A runaway team upsetting a chuck wagon had spelled the end of Big Dave, Jackson's father, during a spring round-up. "Little Dave" Jackson had been less than a year old when that happened, and the following winter typhoid fever had carried off his mother, leaving him no memory of her whatever.

"I see the Great Far-West Telegraph Company still stands." The sheriff pointed up at two rusty wires nailed between two trees. "Yuh an' George shore had some big notions when yuh was kids, didn't yuh?"

Jackson nodded, almost smiled. The old telegraph line between the Flying J and the Bleeding Heart had once been the greatest dream of two boys of sixteen. Erected with less than ten dollars

worth of wire and a boxful of cast-off instruments, Jackson and Big George had put up the line and set themselves to the task of learning Morse. It had been an idea worth several million dollars in the minds of two youths, but it had been like a lot of boy's dreams.

Jackson had tired of it in a year. Big George, always the stay-at-home, still toyed with his old key and his sounder in a little sod-roofed hut above the bunkhouse—a hut that had once started out as the beginning point of a great telegraph company, that would stretch into every arm of the back-country from one end of the Far West to the other!

But Jackson was still trying to keep his eyes on Thunder. The dog had swung to the left to strike the pine thickets. Pine needles muffled the hoofs of the horses, and they swung down to the creek almost noiselessly. The main house and the bunkhouse were reached by the same kind of bridge that spanned the rock-walled chasm in front of the Flying J.

"There's yore Thunder!" hissed the sheriff when they were coming up to the corrals. "Right in front of the barn."

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THE dog stood there, looking back at them in the widening moonlight. No lights at all showed around the barn, but the bunkhouse fifty yards north of the main house was aglow from every window. In the main house a lamp was burning in the long kitchen where Anse Rainey usually worked over his tally books.

"It's too bad that Thunder can't talk," growled the sheriff as the crowd of horsemen dismounted quietly at the lower side of the first corrals. "Right here would be where he could tell us somethin', an' a lot of our big hunt might come to a quick end."

A glance at the horses in the corrals told them it had been at least several hours since either one of them had been ridden, but it was something else when Fargo and Jackson left the others to wait and slipped into the largest barn. In the rear stalls they found three horses with their backs still wet with sweat. The sheriff put his ear to each animal's side to listen, then he stood back to nod grimly.

"Hearts are all still poundin' like thunder. They ain't been here more'n ten minutes."

"There were tracks of only two horses on the creek—"

"Yeah, Dave, but a look-out was up on the slope somewhere. Let's see who's home in the bunkhouse."

They crossed the bridge quietly, the gang behind following like stalking ghosts in the long shadows under the trees. A door in the north end of the bunkhouse slammed before they reached it, and they glanced in through the side windows to take stock of the little crowd inside.

The bunkhouse was long and low, log-walled and sod-roofed. A big-bellied stove with its door open and a lazy fire burning in it stood in the center of the room. At one side of the stove was a long table covered with red blankets. Around the table stood eight men with a dice game in full-swing. Each man was bare-headed, each had stripped off his topshirt. One hairy-chested, short-necked giant of a man stood at the end of the table in only his trousers and boots.

It was not the kind of gang one would have seen in the Bleeding Heart bunkhouse a few years before Pride Rainey had exerted his strange new business methods into the management of his father's affairs. All the old riders of the Bleeding Heart had been given their walking papers and sent on the drift to find jobs elsewhere. Rough-handed, rowdy men had taken their places, men who would back Pride Rainey in any kind of quarrel.

Except for the bare-waisted one, Jackson had seen all of them at one time or another in the past year. He moved on to the north door with the sheriff behind him, giving the familiar rawhide latch-string a pull. The gang at the table turned, staring at him as he pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"Howdy, folks!"

"Just like that, huh?" The bare-waisted man had the dice in his hands and swung around. "Where I come from, by God, men knock at a door before they come bargin' in!"

"We don't have anything to hide out here." Jackson was abrupt, straight to

the point. "Which three of you men have been doing a little riding recently?"

"Oh, the law, eh!" The bare-waisted man grinned as he saw the sheriff loom behind Jackson in the doorway. "Well, if that's all you came for, we've *all* been ridin'. All day—since daylight. Hell, we've been brandin' young bovines since sunup. What's the big noise? Somebody steal a pack of peanuts down the block?"

"Brandin' bovines, huh?" The sheriff answered him. "That's good, but I'll bet half of yuh fine cow-servants never saw a brandin' iron until yuh come to work for the Bleedin' Heart. Somebody in this crowd knows a man's been shot at the Flyin' J, an' it wasn't long ago. Fact is, two men got shot. One's killed straight out. The other may be dead by this time. Somebody a while before sundown shot Old Dad Langley on the east slope of the Hump."

"Oh, the old blister!" The big man laughed almost in Jackson's face. " 'Old Peace Pipe,' some of us called 'im. Always sticking his damned old meddlin' nose into other people's business! Who cares?"

It was too much for Jackson. He stepped forward, body suddenly in a crouch. A left fist snapped out, the right one following. There was a sickening smack as bone and flesh met bone and flesh. The big man seemed to tear off the floor. He flung backward, a loose sprawling thing landing on the table.

"By God," snarled a man at the other end of the table, surging back toward a holstered Colt hanging to the post of a bunk, "we ain't the kind to stand for *this!*"

"Better lay down for it, then!" A window pane smashed in, and through it poked a long six-shooter with a big raw-boned hand behind it. Above that hand, leering through the unbroken panes, was the raw-boned, ruddy face of a Broken Bow cowboy. "There ain't a man in this country who can talk about Ol' Dad like that an' not get hit. Come outside, an' I'll lay off my gun. I'll fist-whip yuh so fast yo'll think the hawgs have jumped yuh."

"Take it easy, Brooks, take it easy," intoned the sheriff. "Ain't a bit of use in startin' a fuss. Nope, we ain't here for that."

He walked slowly forward, looking at each double-decker bunk. Three upturned hats lying on one bunk right in front of the open door of the stove interested him the most. He felt of them, runing his fingers over the sweatbands, and nodded grimly.

"Never could keep my hand off a good-lookin' hat," he chuckled. "These shore look good, but," he frowned, "they ain't the real thing. No, sir, by jumbo, they're right foolin' to the eye. Three or four dollars, maybe, an' that's all. Not so expensive as I thought.

"Like hell!" sneered a little, sandy-haired man with huge front teeth that made him look parrot-faced. "I paid thirty dollars for that hat in Al Furstnow's store in Miles City. Yuh just don't know much, law-fella. Blacky Zunk, here," he nodded to the low-browed man still sprawled on the table, "he paid fifty for his. Able Clark paid—"

"Yuh damned fool!" A tall, hump-shouldered man's fist drove straight, knocking the little man down. "This damned law bird—"

"—wanted to know who owned these hats, yeah." A long Colt had jumped into the sheriff's hand. "Yes, sir, that's what I wanted to know. Stand still, the whole push of yuh!"

It was queer business now. He shoved the hump-shouldered man around like something tied to the muzzle of his six-shooter. His left hand swept down behind the man. He brought it up quickly between the man's legs, in spite of the fellow's twisting and squirming.

"Sweat!" nodded the sheriff. "An' it's right there, mister. Me, now, I've been poundin' saddle leather all my life. I know where yuh sweat the most when yuh ride hard. Set down!" He slipped his six-shooter back into its holster, and from each of his hip pockets he slowly sawed out a pair of old-fashioned handcuffs and tossed them on the table with a metallic clatter. Then he looked back at the hump-shouldered man.

"Better get some more clothes on," he smiled. "It's sorter windy in spots an' plenty cold out tonight. This bird on the table, you, an' that little gander on the floor are goin' to do some more ridin'. Yo're goin' to have a Saturday night look

at Purple Cross an' see what a purty jail we've got. Don't start anything. The boys outside are watchin' yuh through the windows—an' their trigger-fingers are plumb itchy!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Bullet-Song

ANSE RAINEY appeared when the three white-faced, handcuffed men were ready to be marched out the door. "I'm a man standin' on my own ground an' I've got all the right in the world to know what the hell's goin' on here!"

"Yeah, I 'spect so, Anse." Long Jim Fargo cocked his head to one side.

Anse Rainey was really not much to look at. He was long, hump-shouldered, and so loose-jointed he was always making people think that he was about to fall apart. Garbed only in his boots, underwear and trousers, he had come scurrying up to the bunkhouse with a long old repeating rifle under his arm.

"Out with it!" he snarled as the sheriff continued to gander at him silently.

"I don't want to knock your face off, Jim," Anse continued. "What's them handcuffs doin' on my men? What right yuh got to be takin' 'em outa here? If they're arrested, then where's yore warrant? Yuh have to have warrants for men these days, Jim Fargo. Yuh just don't pick up people, an' slam 'em in jail."

The sheriff cocked his head to the other side. "Yuh remind me of a heap of things I've seen an' don't care about seein' no more, Anse. Yo're like yore son Pride. Yuh start runnin' at the lip an' just keep runnin' an' runnin', but yuh don't say much. Warrant?" He slapped the butts of the old six-shooters at his hips. "There's two of 'em. Two for ever' man I take to jail.

"I know we've got a big-talkin' new judge in Purple Cross. Yuh an' yore Pride rode the country wild all last spring to get yore man elected. Yuh tried to get me outa my job by runnin' a big, black-jawed horse thief agin' me who turns out last fall to be just one year outa the pen down in Texas.

"For nigh thirty years we had old Joe Stoutt as judge. He never could spout Latin so's nobody could tell what or why he was arrested for. Guess he'd never broke open a law book, but he sure knowed right from wrong, an' yuh didn't have to wait to get lawyered dead-broke to find which was which. Where's yore wife, an' step-gal?"

"Huh?" The unexpected question caught Rainey when he was just opening his mouth. "Why—why, ol' Doc John Neeley come by here in his ol' buggy, goin' to the Flyin' J. Lige Tucker, that half-drunk telegraph operator from the deepo was with 'im. They. . . . But, say, *say,* now!" He caught himself angrily. "What yuh tryin' to do? Throw me off my rights an' my questions? Why, yuh long-legged, goose-necked ol' fool, I'll take my rifle—"

"Then, Anse," cut in the sheriff in his lowest and most patient tone, "yuh know about Ben Langley gettin' killed? Doc an' Lige had heard in town, I guess, an' they come boilin' out—"

"To see ol' Ben, yeah," nodded Rainey, again thrown out of perfect preparedness for another wild run of talk. "My fool wife an' her red-head daughter got in the buggy with 'em. I couldn't hold 'em back with all my threats an' cussin'.

"But—say, *say,* yuh ain't stoppin' me! Yuh know full well, long laigs, that ol' Ben Langley had to die some fool time—"

"Just like Big George, I reckon?" cut in the sheriff again in that same patient tone. "Yes, sir, Anse, just like pore, peaceful George was shot tonight, huh?"

"George *Rainey?"* Anse Rainey's eyes widened, face turning suddenly white. "What—what yuh sayin', Jim? Yuh can't mean *our* Big George?"

The sheriff was growling now. "It's because of Big George's shootin' that I'm takin' these three monkeys to town an' lockin' 'em up. Maybe I'll throw the key away. Now lis'en to me!"

"Go on!" snarled Rainey. "But—but I swear, Jim, I ain't no man yuh can fool with tonight!"

"Yuh tell 'im what happened at the Flyin' J." Fargo turned to Jackson. "I'm beginnin' to believe he likes Big George, in spite of his half-baked fool Pride. Maybe it's just because George is such a good hand around the ranch, while Pride never moves a hand to nothin' except to

blow the money the rest of them make."

Jackson told him about it, giving him all the details. Rainey kept a mean scowl on his face, but he stood there, mouth opening and closing by turns. When Jackson had finished, the cattleman started forward, his eyes intently fixed on the three prisoners.

Blacky Zunk, the big low-brow, flung up his shackled hands and stopped him with an oath.

"Remember, you old fool! There's still that hotel job in Chicago! You'd better keep that damned well in mind—unless you want your simple-minded pretty boy Pride to go back East again. This time it won't be with a train-load of bovines and a hotel safety box jammed full of money to spend when he sells the load! Remember!"

Jackson saw Rainey halt, and the expressions that flashed back and forth across his face. In one instant a fever to kill was replaced by a look of strange terror. A glance at Long Jim Fargo told Jackson that the sheriff's ears were cocked.

It was already time for Jackson to go. It had been a year since Dale Rainey and her mother had dared openly visit the Flying J. Now that they were there, Jackson's only thought was to get home as quickly as possible. The rest of the bunch would only stand here and jaw among themselves, or start a quarrel with Anse, until the prisoners headed for Purple Cross.

The longer way back to the ranch would be the easiest and the quickest for a horse that was already tired. With Thunder trotting along beside him, Jackson headed for the break in the Hump and was soon entering it with the bright moon now a huge yellow lantern at his back.

It was like entering a great, roofless hallway. The floor of the break was almost level. Dark walls and shelves of rock and brittle shale lifted for four hundred feet at either hand. Clumps of sagebrush and dwarfed pine hung here and there, getting thicker where the walls swung back into sharp slopes reaching on to the top of the Hump. Jackson had been through it so many times he knew every inch of it.

They were half through when some kind of crazy fit seized the big wolf-dog. Thunder stopped, stiff-legged, every bristle suddenly up as a quick swoop of wind came through the break from the west.

Jackson pulled up. His right hand jerked forward, seized the horse's mane, and he was flinging himself out of his saddle in a side-long half-spill with the clear moon still a big lantern behind him.

The one fast move saved his life. Jackson had no more than touched one foot to the ground when a gleaming ribbon of fire backed by a rifle's shattering crash lurched down from a shelf of rock seventy yards ahead and to his right. The slug *whanged* as it struck the saddle horn and glanced upward in a way that would have caught a rider squarely in the pit of the stomach, had his body been on the horse to meet it.

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JACKSON plowed himself down behind a clump of brush and a few low rocks as a second shot sounded from the ledge. The bullet struck the rocks in front of him, bits of stone flying, a puff of dust spurting up. The startled horse, now rearing and plunging, wheeled. Reins still on his neck he galloped away, heading back toward the Bleeding Heart, hoofs pounding on the shale-strewn ground.

A third shot came now, then a fourth, each bullet slapping the rocks to go flinging away with an eerie shriek in the night. It was rifle against an old, well-worn Colt here, but Jackson opened fire on the spot where the flashes had licked downward from the ledge. It was actually a surprise when he heard a yell up there, then a wild oath that came floating down, followed by another gashing streak of flame from the rifle.

It was time to move. Jackson rolled his body farther to his left and gained the shelter of larger rocks, when another shot churned down at him. The man up there could see everything below in that strong moonlight, and he was now unerringly slamming lead against the larger rocks.

In desperation Jackson fired again and again. At any moment some one else might open up on him. That was his thought as he kept trying to gain better shelter, but the muzzle of the rifle fol-

lowed him persistently. Each move brought an echoing crash and a bullet striking into the rocks and brush only a foot or two away.

Thunder had disappeared with the horse and Jackson could only feel a throb of relief when he saw that the dog was gone. He took another quick shot at the hiding gunman on the ledge, and dropped back as a sharp crash of the rifle answered.

He rolled over as the bullet struck, and felt for cartridges. His fingers told him there were only seven in the sagging old loops. He swore under his breath when he realized that he had fired five shots and had succeeded in getting only a yell out of one of the bushwhackers for his pains. The rest of his bullets would have to account for something far better than that, if he expected to get out of here alive.

Now he was waiting for a second shot to come as he watched through a narrow opening between two rocks in front of his face, the six-shooter cocked. The bullet missed by a yard this time, and the six-shooter roared. A yelp came back to him as his bullet showered one of the hidden rifleman with fine rock splinters.

Then a shadowy shape moved up on the ledge, a few yards back from the spot where Jackson's bullet had struck. Jackson's finger was tightening on the trigger when he suddenly lowered his weapon.

A shot and a hoarse bawl of terror now arose from the ledge. Jackson saw the rifleman reel up, a tall shadow with the moonlight full upon him and a perfect target. He let go his rifle and the Winchester slipped over the ledge, and landed on the floor of the break, two hundred feet below.

A wordless shout of alarm and terror came from the rifleman. For that second shadow up there had struck, a long, black streak flying straight to the rifleman's throat. The man fell back. Loose rock underfoot came rattling down. The fighting man stumbled. Another cry was stopped short, and even in the noise of the struggling and the shifting of the loose rocks, Jackson heard a sound that was like something being jerked out of a mudhole.

There was only a blur of shadow, fighting and twisting flat on the ledge now. More rocks slid and came rattling down, and a bulky thing followed them, something that appeared to stretch slowly outward from the ledge. Suddenly it was falling, turning over and over—the figure of the rifleman death-bound for the rocks below.

Jackson had stumbled to his feet. Face pale, mouth open with surprise, he stood there. The thing up there outlined in the moonlight had robbed him of his voice. It had come out to the lip of the ledge and was looking down, ears flat against its black head, black body tense, only its tail a waving banner.

Thunder, half-wolf, half-dog, had fought again for his master.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dead Men Mean Pay-Dirt

LEAVING Anse Rainey weaving back to the main house like a drunk in a daze, the sheriff and the punchers had just hit the main trail for Purple Cross when the noise of the shooting reached them. Ordering six of the men to take the prisoners on into town, Fargo headed for the break in the Hump at a gallop, with a couple of brawny Broken Bow riders behind him.

At the mouth of the break they had come upon the horse that had deserted Jackson. They had caught him, bringing him back, and in a few minutes they were galloping up and sawing their horses to a halt, the dust swirling around them.

"It looks like Thunder did the dirty work," Jackson told them as he finished relating what had happened. "The fellow's ahead there, just where he dropped, I guess."

"An' a mighty complete job yore Thunder done!" exclaimed the sheriff when the old lawman swung out of his saddle to stare at the dead man face-downward among the rocks. "Thunder musta give 'im just the right kind of a push—Holy ol' Mackinaw, boys!"

He had reached forward, rolling the dead man over on his back. "This pins both my ears back flat agin my head! Why—why, this is Wyomin' Sam McGee, one of yore Granpa Johnny's best riders,

Dave—an'—an' Thunder tore the throat outa 'im as slick as a grizzly coulda done it!"

Jackson was stunned. All of them were speechless as they stood there, mouths open, their eyes wide as they looked at each other. A big Broken Bow cowboy, Ace Olfang, finally shook back his shoulders.

"Yes, it's Wyomin' Sam. Been ridin' for Granpa Johnny for quite a spell, too. Has anybody forgot that he went back yonder to Chicago with that big trainload of cattle that Pride Rainey took off to sell?"

"But—but," stammered the sheriff, "he ain't much more'n spoken to Pride since then, Ace! Hell, we don't have to mention Pride's name ever' seven minutes by the clock, do we? An' come to think of it," he jabbed the cowboy on the chest with a horny thumb, "yuh went back East with Pride an' them cattle, yoreself."

"To pick up some extra money, yeah," nodded Olfang, grimly. "Me an' Wyomin', Big George, an' two fellas who used to ride for the Bleedin' Heart. One named Paddy Kelly, one named Hank Shaw. All of us, except Big George, went back there with a sixgun in a Texas shoulder holster under our left armpits.

"Big George didn't have so much as a penknife. He didn't get even enough to eat on the trip. Pride was handlin' the eatin' money while the rest done the work —Big George the most of it, to tell the truth. We made Pride feed us. George just stood around, lookin' like he didn't belong with the bunch an' was wishin' he was back home."

"Go on!" urged the sheriff, when Olfang halted. "Yo're about to spill somethin'. Don't let a good notion stop yuh."

"I don't know too much of it to spill, Jim." Olfang looked him squarely in the eyes. "I made Pride pay me off the next couple of days after we got there. He give Big George an' me our tickets to get home on. But somethin' happened back there to Pride an' Wyomin' an' the two Bleedin' Heart punchers.

"Paddy Kelly come back here like a rabbit on the run. He got his back-pay from Anse an' his ridin' outfit an' a mighty good saddle hoss to clear the country on. Hank Shaw hung around for half the winter, lookin' ready to run ever'time he saw yuh or a deppity comin'.

"I never bragged about it, but Hank was my cousin from Missouri, out here on the dodge from shootin' somebody back there. He told me what happened in Chicago because he got scared an' thought maybe Pride would kill 'im. That was last spring, just before Pride come to yuh claimin' he'd stole a horse an' some money to jump this country on.

"Back in Chicago, Pride an' Wyomin' got into a poker game in their hotel room with big-money gamblers. They all got drunk. Paddy an' Hank was out cold an' lyin' on the bed when the ruction started. Two big fellas walked in when there was a lot of poker money on the table. Each fella had a big knife in his hand an' hollered 'Stick 'em up.'

"Pride an' Wyomin' come up shootin', an' the two fellas with the knives went down. Paddy an' Hank woke up in the middle of it, an' somebody in the crowd said, 'Good Gawd, them's detectives yo've killed.'

"It was a mess then, shore enough. Ever'body throwed his gun an' his holster out the window into a vacant lot. Then they grabbed what clothes they'd brought along, run down a back stairway with some of the Chicago fellas leadin' the way while some more went down to the counter where yuh write yore name in a book.

"They made a deal with the fella who run the place to keep his mouth shut an' keep anybody from knowin' who'd rented them rooms, an' followed the rest of the bunch over to another hotel 'way 'cross the town. They stayed there the rest of the night, then hid for days while the law was lookin' for 'em. Hank an' Paddy managed to get away fairly quick, but 'cause they'd done the shootin' it musta cost Pride all that cattle money so him an' Wyomin' could get outa town."

"That's a long tale an' a sad un," grimaced the sheriff. "Why didja wait until now to tell it?"

"Hank Shaw was kinfolks, as I've said," frowned the cowboy. "Yuh don't go tellin' tales on yore kinfolks where I come from—not until they're plumb outa danger, anyhow. Hank's outa danger of

ever'thing now. Pa wrote me he got killed at a Choctaw dance down in Oklahoma. Wouldn't tell it all now, but when men like Ol' Dad an' Big George gets shot, an' then Dave Jackson starts gettin' lead slung at him from the dark—well, I sorter figured it time to speak."

"Yeah," nodded the sheriff, "an' now that yuh have had yore say, Ace, yuh keep yore mouth shut. Tight shut. I've got some tall thinkin' to do, but somethin' tells me we're about to hit pay-dirt purty soon. Let's get Wyomin' across a saddle. An' remember this: When we get to the Flyin' J we don't know how nor why Wyomin' got killed. We just found 'im like this. Come here, Thunder! I wanta pat yuh on the head."

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THEY were quiet as they rode on through the break. Fargo had given up the horse he had been riding for the body of Wyoming Sam, and rode double with Jackson. Thunder trotted along with no more concern than a hound pup that had killed a rabbit only a short time before.

Jackson could not help studying the dog. He could remember a good many things about Thunder now. The dog had never shown any signs of viciousness toward Wyoming Sam McGee, but he had made it a point lately to keep a respectful distance from the man. Thunder had seen a decided change somewhere in the big cowboy. That was a certainty now. A good dog had that strange, half-believable way of ferreting out things for himself that a man would never be able to see until it was too late.

Old Dad Langley had known that all his life. Jackson remembered that Thunder had had something to do with the old man's hiring of men several times during the past four years. When a stranger came looking for a job, Langley had quietly managed to have the dog close by, and there were several men who would have been hired at the flying J, had Thunder not been seen with his bristles up in the background.

"Yuh two ride on an' say nothin'," ordered Fargo, turning to glance at the two cowboys behind him when they came to the West Horn. "Me an' Dave will cross the crick here with the body an' ease it into the blacksmith shop below the corrals. An' another thing," he held up his hand, "yuh needn't tell anybody what we done at the Bleedin' Heart. Just let that sorter leak out in its own way. We don't want that crowd up the crick goin' hawg-wild an' headin' for Purple Cross to try to take them birds outa jail an' hang 'em."

They turned down through a break in the bank of the creek. Thunder kept with Jackson, but the wolf in him had no love for water. He crossed the creek by making desperate leaps from one stone to another in the shallows and reached the west bank happily enough with dry feet and a downright wolfish grin in his broad face.

Because of the danger of sparks flying from the forge when there was a lot of work to do, the blacksmith shop was almost two hundred yards from the barns, the sheds and the haystacks. Jackson and Fargo came up quietly to Langley's carpenter shop behind it.

The crowd at the Flying J was still growing, but this spot was deserted, and Jackson slipped on into the room to light the lantern over the thick-planked carpenter bench where Old Dad Langley had sometimes worked until midnight.

"A better place we never had," nodded the sheriff when they brought Wyoming Sam's body in and stretched it flat on its back on the bench, with Thunder seeking a far corner to sit there watching them. "Push that door closed tight, will yuh? Somebody might see the light an' get curious."

Jackson closed the door while Fargo's expert hands searched the dead man. An old buckskin poke was dragged out of a hip pocket with a few dollars in currency inside it. A cheap watch and a jack-knife followed. In the watch pocket, having been carefully folded and shoved down under the watch, was a mere scrap of paper.

Fargo plucked it out between his forefinger and thumb. He unfolded it and held it up to the light, eyes squinting as he stared at the precise penciled lettering while Jackson looked at it across his shoulder:

D. J. by Sunday. Ship Rock
Sunday night at ten. Do it!

" 'D. J.' meant yuh, Dave," nodded the sheriff, lowering the note and staring at the wall. "That '*Do it*' meant business. Have yuh noticed anything right queer about Wyomin' of late?"

"Only that he has been out a lot at night. He—"

A low growl from Thunder halted him. The dog was up, every bristle lifted, eyes staring at the big window behind the long bench. Jackson and Fargo ducker, hands going to their six-shooters.

Jim Fargo was not quite quick enough. A shot roared, glass showering. With a grunt the sheriff staggered back.

"Blinded me, Dave!" he snarled. "Don't let 'im get away!"

Jackson was already plunging toward the door. A fierce yank failed to budge it. Somebody had fastened the rusty scrap-iron latch outside. He wheeled just as the sheriff, face spotted with blood, splattered down the lantern with a blow of a Colt, throwing the room in darkness. But Jackson had already seized a three-legged stool. He sent it hurling through the window, shattering the panes and cross-bars, and then he was going over the bench and plunging outside.

A shot licked back at him from a running man who had already reached the horses. The man was flying into the saddle when Jackson opened fire. There was a yell that ended in a groan, then a horse beginning to buck. Jackson fired once more, and the man was coming down from the saddle. The wheeling horse kicked him with both feet, driving him backward into a bundle on the ground as the sheriff and Thunder came through the window.

"Did he get you, Sheriff?"

"Just the glass, Dave!" snapped the old lawman. "He fired for the belly I reckon, not botherin' to take aim, an' I got smacked with a face-full of chips an' splinters. My eyes seem to be all right, except for the blood drippin' off my brow. Who the hell was it? Yuh got 'im, didn't yuh?"

"Got him, yes. But I don't know who he is!" Jackson had already reached the man and was bending over him in the moonlight coming through the trees. "Don't believe I ever saw him before!"

The sheriff was wiping his eyes with a faded bandanna when he reached the figure at Jackson's feet and got a good look at the upturned face. "Little dark critter, ain't he? Don't look much like our brand of folks, an' he ain't. I said that, the first time I saw 'im get off the train last Monday mornin'. Cattle-buyer, I was told in the Horned Owl. Our new Judge Paul Hennesey knowed 'im—or said he did. Introduced 'im to me as a Mr. Ira Shacker. Yuh shore got 'im, right through the left ear. Hell of a way for him to buy cows, shootin' at me through a window."

He arose, still tenderly mopping at his face. "He's from Chicago, too! Leastwise that was what he told ever'body in Purple Cross. If it's true, they must have a lot of folks 'round that town that they'd like to get rid of of late. But here comes the crowd, hang it, an' I guess our little secret about Wyomin' gettin' killed is right now shot to hell. Let me do the talkin'. I used to be considered the best liar in Mississippi when I was a boy!"

CHAPTER SIX

Purple Cross Goes Mad

RIDERS swinging out in an ever-widening circle finally found the dead man's horse, but they learned little enough from that. It was a rent-horse from the public stables in Purple Cross, and by the time the riders returned to the blacksmith shop, Long Jim Fargo had the second dead man searched from head to foot and stretched out on the carpenter bench beside the body of Wyoming Sam.

"The little ball's unwindin'," he had told the crowd, "but just yet I ain't in no mood for my best lyin'. How or where Wyomin' got killed is a little secret I aim to keep to myself until I'm ready to part company with it. This fella, now," he nodded to the body of the short, thickset dark man, "he just goes to show yuh that it don't do to play with a six-shooter. He was playin' with a Colt when—well, when it sorter bucked up an' kicked 'im in the ribs an' through the left ear, yuh might say."

Jackson soon slipped away and headed on for the house, leading the horses behind him. He dropped their reins near the hitchrack, and was glad to see that most of the crowd was still down around the blacksmith shop. More than a score of women—late-comers in buckboards—were now in the living room and the kitchen.

Big hat in his hand, Jackson swung to the left, passing the table where the sheet-draped body of Old Dad was lying, his lips tightening as he glanced at it. Going down a hall, he came to the door of a big bedroom in the north end of the house. The door was closed and locked.

He rapped softly several times before gray-headed little Doc Neeley cautiously cracked open the door and took a peep at him before letting him in. The door was then locked behind him.

It was a quiet session in that room. Jackson knew he would find Big George here, but he had never expected to find everybody trying to sit on the bed with him.

Dale Rainey was there, pretty head aglow with the lamplight in her dark-red hair. She sat to the left of Big George, a pad and a pencil poised on her knee. Her mother was on the other side.

Granpa and Granny Jackson sat in chairs. Lige Tucker, the telegraph operator, looked like he was trying to hog it all. He was almost in the middle of the bed, looking closely at Big George's face as the man lay on his back, head propped high on a pillow. Doc Neeley picked up a lamp and returned to his chair at the head of the bed, holding the lamp close so the light would shine in the wounded man's face.

"We can go ahead now," he ordered quietly. "Let's take that last question, Dale. How'd he answer it?"

"He said," the girl started reading from her pad, " 'The fourth shot made me go limp. I looked back when the first shot was fired. In the flash of the second gun I saw Able Clark and Sandy in the light. No, I didn't see anybody else.' "

Fargo came in a few minutes later. The blood had stopped, but his face looked like a wildcat had scratched it. He stood there gander necking and staring at Big George. There was no sign of movement around the wounded man's lips. Big George's eyes alone were moving, the telegraph operator watching and whispering to the girl. It took a minute for the sheriff to understand it.

"Well, I'll just be damned," he finally whispered. "Big George is talkin' telegraph talk with his eyelids! What's he said that might be of some help to us so far, Dale?"

"He knows who shot him, but he doesn't know why." The girl looked up, saw Jackson for the first time, and smiled faintly at him. "He saw two men in the flashes of the guns. Both are riders Pride hired recently. One is a man called Clark. They call the other Sandy. I don't know them very well, because I never talk to them or go to the table when they're having their meals."

"Can't blame yuh for that." The sheriff stiffened. "But there was three men on that job, one hidin' back to watch, I reckon. No matter, they're all three in jail by this time. What's his chances for a pull-through, Doc?"

"Fairly good." The old doctor glanced up. "The bullet's out. He may be like this for quite a time—sixteen, thirty-six hours, maybe a lot longer. But he ought to make it all right in the end."

"That's fine," nodded the sheriff. "I ain't no doctor, but I'd say not to worry 'im too much. Things are comin' 'round."

* * *

After a while, Jackson was at last able to see the girl alone. He caught her in Granma's little sewing room. In a moment he had kicked the door closed with his toe and had her in his arms. She stood there with her head on his chest, her arms locked around his neck, body trembling, and slow, silent tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Old Dad said it had come, Dale," he whispered. "We've got to square our shoulders and take it. All along we've known that something was in the making. Pride's behind this, darling. He's a fool and always was a fool. We've got to face that—"

"You—you don't believe Pride shot George, Dave?" She looked up, eyes swimming. "You can't believe he would actually do that? You couldn't think he'd shoot poor Old Dad?"

"Hush, Dale." He squeezed her back to him with his left arm and pressed her right hand against her head. "George has told us who shot him, but Long Jim and some of the rest of us already knew. You can't fool Fargo. Too many have tried it and failed. I can't believe Pride shot Dad. It's all coming out of that crowd Pride had come with him or follow him out here from that trip back East. I think we've stumbled up against the secret tonight. . . . No, I'd give you my heart on a platter, but I've already given my word to Long Jim that I'll keep my mouth shut about some things until he's ready to let them fly loose."

"Keep your word to Long Jim, Dave." She looked up, stroking his face and smiling at him through the tears, then the first sob broke from her. "B-but I'm scared, Dave—terribly frightened. Those new men, and all the old ones gone, men I knew like brothers. . . ."

He kissed her tenderly. "But you'll face it—and something else, too. Pride's smart airs have led him into a trap. Don't be surprised if somebody kills him before this thing is done. No, no," he shook her. "I won't do it unless I have to. I promise you."

"I know you won't, Dave!" She looked up, smiling again. "You wouldn't do that to anybody. But—but can you tell me what the shooting was about a little while ago?"

"Yes, Dale, I can tell you," he answered grimly. "You won't say anything about it until Long Jim gets ready to talk about it. I killed a man down by the blacksmith shop."

"Dave!"

"Well, you asked me, honey," he frowned. "We've known each other all our lives. I hope we're going to know each other a long time yet. I'm not going to jail for what I did. Long Jim will see to that. But listen to me, Dale. Do we have to wait until Christmas to get married?"

She did not get to answer him. A tremendous splurge of excitement broke loose outside. Men were running around the house from the front to the rear, the thumping boot heels and dragging spurs harsh sounds on the ground. A voice came to them, each word sounding like a wail soaring up above the rest of the noise:

"Shore, it's the Bleedin' Heart! Can't be nothin' else! Yuh can almost see the flames lickin' the sky! The whole world's afire over there!"

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JACKSON and the sheriff were in the lead of the swarm of riders banging along behind them, heading for the Bleeding Heart. With a chance here to swing out like a great fan, they started pulling up as they stared at the fires below.

"Hell," cried the sheriff, "it ain't the houses an' barns! It's them four big haystacks up the crick. The fire ain't yet touched nothin' else, an' we're in time now to save it if it does."

A rifle *whang-whanged* as they tore on down the slope with better footing here for the pounding hoofs of the sweat-slinging horses. Those two shots came from a window in the north end of the kitchen of the main house. The heavy reports of six-shooters back at the kitchen from the bunkhouse. Then, with the horsemen on the slope sweeping closer, a wild-braying voice arose down there in a song:

"O, leaped in the saddle, I give a
little yell,
An' them long-horn cattle, they went
to hell!"

"That's Anse, drunker'n a barbwire fence!" called back the sheriff. "I'd sooner fight six bobcats bare-handed than to fight 'im when he's like that. Try not to have to shoot 'im."

The crowd was soon swinging out to surround the place. Fargo and Jackson rode straight on with the sheriff yelling his head off to everybody who would listen to him. The rifle crashed at them from a bedroom window in the northwest corner of the house, the bullet whistling just over their heads.

"Anse! *Anse!"* bawled the sheriff. "Anse, yuh hold yore fire, yuh hawg-eyed ol' fool! This is Jim Fargo!"

The rifle blazed again, this time its bullet going yards above their heads in the slowly graying morning air. Low on their saddles, Jackson and the sheriff

kept on, heading straight for the porch with Thunder hard at the heels of Jackson's horse. Before they reached the porch, a Colt in the bunkhouse roared at them.

Jackson hit the porch first. In a flying rush he struck the front door, knocking it open and going to his knees in the dark old living room.

Fargo, right behind, stumbled and fell over him as a ripping gash of flame tore at them from the kitchen doorway. Both arose at once and sent the big table in front of them hurling toward the door as a second shot ripped across the room.

"Try not to kill 'im!" snarled the sheriff. "He's just the same as a crazy man, Dave!"

"Naw! naw!" They heard Anse Rainey's rifle drop, heard him smashing back against the long dining table and the cane-bottomed kitchen chairs. "It's a grizzly b'ar! Git that grizzly off of me! Git 'im off. Dammit!"

"Thunder!" Jackson's voice was a roar.

He leaped over the upset table, stumbled again, and plowed through the doorway to sprawl atop of Rainey and the dog. Rainey was down, underneath the dog. Thunder had not gone for a throat this time. He had seized his man by the right arm at the elbow and was holding Rainey there, the fierce growls of worse things to come rumbling from his throat, his coppery eyes glittering.

As Jackson and the sheriff piled on the downed man, the dog released his hold and leaped nimbly to one side, watching the struggle and ready to dart in again, if it looked as if his master was about to get the worst of it.

"What the hell's the matter with yuh?" leered the sheriff as they picked up the fighting fool and flung him in a chair. "Tryin' to kill ever'body an' burn up ever' damn thing on the place?"

"I'm tired of bein' blackmailed an' I'm killin' wild!" yelled Rainey. "Pride brought this on me, I tell yuh! Him an' that fool Wyomin'. I've gone the limit. I'm lettin' the whole world know. I sneaked out yonder an' set them haystacks afire to make people see the light an' come. I ain't crazy. I ain't drunk. Hell, I only drunk a quart. I'm just killin' wild, I tell yuh! I'm killin' wild!

"Yuh wanta know *why?*" He glared up at them as they held him there. "I sneaked back out yonder to that bunkhouse after yuh fellas was gone. I heard them five men in that bunkhouse talkin' an' laughin' about what a fool I am.

"Ever since Pride went back to Chicago I've been thinkin' the law's liable to bang up to my door an' nab 'im for killin' two deetectives in a hotel. It's cost me more'n a hundred thousan' dollars already, Jim. An' nobody got killed. They sneaked blank cartridges in the guns—"

"When Pride an' the others was asleep, yeah!" shot in the sheriff. "I oughta kick yore belly off. That's one of the oldest tricks some of them sharpers have in them big towns. They make you think yo've killed when yuh ain't, an' then they go on collectin' hush-up money from yuh for the rest of yore lives. Who killed ol' Ben Langley?"

"Maybe one of these can tell yuh before we hang hell out of 'em, Jim!" barked in a voice at the door. "We've got the five what was in the bunkhouse, an' they know what's comin'."

Men were pushing in now. The bunkhouse had been surrounded and the men there had been crying to give up when they saw more riders coming from the Flying J. Fargo and Jackson still had to hold Anse Rainey as they came crowding inside.

"Blacky Zunk killed the old man!" croaked a little pop-eyed man. "Langley was too sharp, an' Big Lick McCoy got scared. He wanted this Jackson out of the way, too. Big Lick saw fine pickin's out here, an' it had already got too hot for us back in Chicago. The bulls was after us, lockin' us up ever' few days. Then along comes Pride like a Christmas tree all loaded down. Him an' Sam McGee thought they were smart. We passed the word, an' Big Lick worked 'em into a right nice little jam."

"Go on, you rat!" snarled a big, fuzzy-haired man with a glass eye and a scar all the way across his face. "They'll hang you for that out in this country. You ain't turnin' State's evidence here like you did in Chi' to clear yourself!"

"I—I ain't gonna hang," croaked the pop-eyed man. "I—I just couldn't stand

it. I ain't killed nobody out here. I ain't had nothin' but a job at forty dollars a month, an' I've worked like the devil for my money—"

"Go on, little fella!" cut in the sheriff. "Tell it all!"

"Sam McGee was to get a thousan' dollars for shootin' Jackson. Big Lick told him he could take that money an' go to Mexico or South America where the law in Chicago would never find 'im. McGee is set to do the job. I'm surprised he ain't done it already."

"An ol' man an' an ol' woman at the Flyin' J wouldn't have been hard to take over. The woman an' gal here could have been whipped in line. Big Lick saw how easy it all was. He was one of the first to follow Pride out here, an' Pride made his daddy help to set him in soft. The only spot that faded on us was gettin' the man in we wanted for sheriff."

"An' who," demanded the sheriff, clearing his throat gently, "was the little, short-legged, fat-bellied fella called Shacker who come to Purple Cross last Monday mornin'?"

"Him!" The pop-eyed man almost grinned. "Why—why, that's Trigger Puchini. Trigger always comes right when there's a big roast on the fire. He's Big Lick's right-hand man."

"That's good." The sheriff rubbed his chin. "Now yuh might tell us where to find this Big Lick McCoy."

"You don't know yet?" The little man grinned all over his face. "Hell, that just goes to show you how slick Big Lick is. You fools out here elected him your judge, under the name of Paul Hennesey —*Haw, haw! haw!*"

"Let me at him!" roared Rainey, fighting with Jackson as he tried to spring out of his chair. "I'm killin' wild, an' I'll make sausage meat out of him with my bare hands!"

★

RAINEY was with them and they were riding with the growing dawn light in their faces before long. There was no real hurry now. With the mob behind coming along at a

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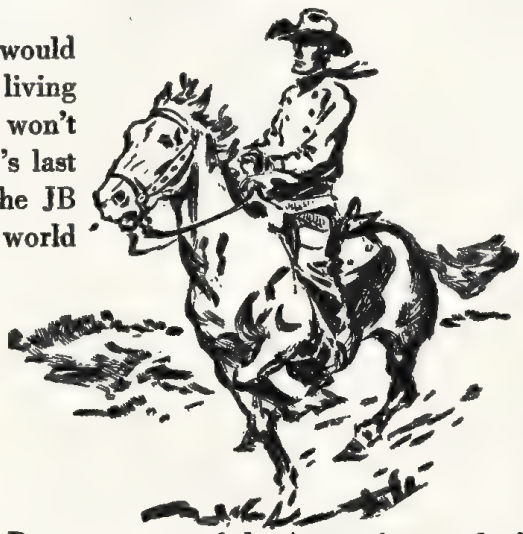

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trot with their prisoners, Jackson and the sheriff were about four hundred yards ahead of the crowd.

They climbed over the east rise of the basin, and saw the sun staring them in the face. When they turned the next bend they saw galloping horsemen ahead

of them, and their eyes widened. Thunder growled and dropped back beside Jackson's horse.

"Say, look here," groaned the sheriff, "ain't them fellas comin' the three I sent to jail from the Bleedin' Heart?"

"None other!" Jackson was staring at them. "Now how the devil did they get here?"

"Not knowin', can't say." The sheriff grinned. "But I sorter figure that it's goin' to be one big joke on somebody!"

The three men were cantering up a few minutes later. Arrogance was written all over them. They had been sent to town without six-shooters or belts, but each man was wearing brand-new belts and a shiny weapon now. They pulled up, sawing their horses to one side. Blacky Zunk had a mean grin over his face when he spoke.

"Got any more good jokes to pull, town clown?"

"Yuh seem to have heap better ones than mine." The sheriff was grinning. "I no more'n head yuh to jail when I meet yuh comin' back, it seems."

Able Clark spoke, words twisting out of the side of his mouth, "He's sharp. Mighty sharp. If a man sweats a little in this country he goes to jail."

"Judge Hennesey ordered us turned loose!" Zunk was still leering. "Hell, we're big people. We haven't punched cows all our lives. We're out, we stay out. Anything to say about it, Daddy Long-Legs?"

"Nope," Jackson shook his head. "I know what yore next job's to be. The next thing is to get rid of me an' Dave. I'm in yore way, Dave's in yore way. Wyomin' Sam didn't get 'im last night. Wyomin's dead. So is Trigger—Trigger somebody. We're after Big Lick an' a few more in Purple Cross right now. The jig's up, yuh see, but yuh can have it quick or slow. Yuh wanta reach for them new shootin'-irons or go back to jail peacefully? Big Lick—"

"He knows!" Zunk's voice was a yell. His hand flew to the butt of a new Colt. "Shoot it out!"

"That's my game!" roared the sheriff, but Jackson was already beating him to it. His horse was rearing, the old Colt in his right hand roaring, the gashes of flame appearing a yard-long.

Zunk slumped in his saddle and fell out of it when his horse wheeled. Able Clark was the next to drop as the blinding blades of fire lurched from a six-shooter in the sheriff's right hand. Clark hit the ground like a tumbling bale of hay. The third man, the little fellow, never reached for either one of his weapons. His hands were up, eyes popping with terror.

"Don't kill us all!" he wailed. "Look—look what's comin' 'round that bend! It—it's the whole country on a horse!"

Zunk was lying there snarling when the gang rode up behind Jackson and the sheriff. The bones of the man's left arm had been shattered at the shoulder. His right arm hung like a broken wing, the blood dripping. In a moment men were literally flying off their horses, and both Zunk and Clark were being snatched to their feet.

"Catch their hosses!" ordered the sheriff. "I'm dyin' to see that Big Lick fella. I'll bet he turns green when he sees me."

They were soon moving on, Zunk and Clark sobbing, the little man too scared even to let a croak out of him.

When only a fringe of pines hid them from the town, the sheriff ordered, "Surround ever'thing. Yo'll take Pride Rainey along with the others when yuh find 'im. But no hangin' bee, now! There'll be one job that we'll try to do legal-like around here. It'll maybe put us back on our feet."

"Shore, shore, Jim!" A Rattlebone cowboy answered him. "There ain't nothin' like law an' order!"

"Pride Rainey won't do nobody any good!" Zunk had all the fight taken out of him and was beginning to blubber. "Not when you find out that he was so

drunk some other drunks had to tie 'im on a horse last night to start home. It happened to be the wrong horse. When he got to spurrin' an' quirtin' it—well, he was pitched out of the saddle, only all of him didn't fall clear. One leg hung. They chased the horse a mile out of town before they caught up with it."

Jackson turned, glancing behind, and was glad for the moment that Anse Rainey had branched away with the other crowd as it split.

"He didn't look like a man when they picked 'im out of the mess," Zunk was going on. "They think he was dead by the time the horse got to the lower end of the street with him."

Jackson and the sheriff were torn out of their saddles less than a minute later. The crowd behind them simply jammed up. Arms flung out. A burly Broken Bow rider seized the sheriff, lifted him, spurred away with him. Another rider caught his horse, dashing on with it.

The same thing happened to Jackson. All of it was like a flash, like guns suddenly going off. They were still more than a half-mile from town.

When the dust cleared, they were standing there facing each other. Jackson's old Colt was gone. The sheriff's holster was empty and baggy—and everybody was gone, the dust bannering, the hoofs hammering, men charging on into Purple Cross beginning to yell.

"Sorter figured that would happen, didn't yuh, Dave?" To Jackson's surprise the sheriff was grinning as he took the makings of a smoke out of his shirt pocket. "I thought for a long time the damned fools wouldn't do it."

"Then," Jackson was still staring at him, "you wanted it just like this, didn't you?"

"Why—why, no, Dave, I didn't." Fargo's grin was an out-and-out lie to his words. "I wanted long-winded trials, barrels of the people's money spent when yuh know the outcome's certain. But," he shrugged, "sometimes it gets the proper things done. Have a smoke? I'm sorter tired."

THE END

PICTURE OF A GRADE-A CITIZEN!

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BUY WAR BONDS TODAY!

An Outcast Rides

By PHILIP KETCHUM

A gun was roaring at his side—Fuller's gun. . . .

A hunted outcast on his own home range, Jim Harrington saw Aaron Taft fatten, like a gorging rangeland spider, on the outfits of hard-pressed ranchers, who seemed tragically unable to fight back — until they themselves, with their families, were drawn into his deadly web of murder!

CHAPTER ONE

Come Back—to Boothill!

THE train's conductor, moving down the aisle of the coach, stopped at Jim Harrington's side. "Be there in about five minutes," he reported. "Guess you'll be glad to get back, huh?"

Harrington nodded. He stared out of

the Boothill Watch

Novel of Outcast Cowmen

the window. During the past half hour it had grown dark but up ahead and to the south he could mark the Spanish peaks outlined against the blue gray of the sky. The sight of them brought a smile to his lips. "Yes," he said slowly, "I'll be glad to get back. Mighty glad."

"Carry your bag up front," offered the conductor.

Harrington shook his head. "I can manage it."

The conductor frowned. He was a much older man than Harrington and he considered the giving of advice a part of his work. "I'd take it mighty easy if I was you," he suggested. "A man can't rush back to health like he can rush to other things. You gotta go slow."

"I've gone slow. Too slow," Harrington commented.

He stood up, swaying unevenly with the motion of the train. He was a tall man and he was very thin. There was little color in his face. His eyes seemed to be set in deep sockets. For four months he had been in a Chicago hospital, only three days before had he been discharged.

As the train started to slow down, the conductor took his arm but Harrington pulled free. "I'll make it, Chris," he said.

Picking up his bag, he walked to the front of the coach, set it down and then lifted his hand to his chest. His chest was encased in a heavy cast and would have to stay that way for a long time. It still pained him, now and then sending agonizing twinges through his body. It was remarkable, he knew, that he was still alive. Most men, with chests crushed as badly as his, wouldn't have pulled through. The Chicago doctors had told him that.

The train ground to a stop and moving out to the coach's platform Harrington could see a few lights and the dark shadows of several buildings. He swung to the ground and looked ahead toward the station.

"Remember, take it easy," cautioned the conductor.

"I will," Harrington promised.

The train whistled. It started to move away, and still staring up toward the station Harrington could make out the figures of several men standing there, watching it. He started forward, wondering who, of those he knew, he would see first.

The group standing in front of the station were watching him and as he drew near them, Harrington recognized George McBride of the Pot Hook and near McBride he saw Harry Rudd, one of the Bar 70 riders. The others he didn't know.

"Harrington?" gasped McBride.

Jim Harrington dropped his bag. "What's left of him."

There was a movement of surprise in the group of men. Rudd blinked at him, moistened his lips and then backed away. He turned and hurried off. One of the other men whistled and someone said something in an undertone to the man standing next to him. McBride looked dazed. He wiped a hand over his face and took a deep breath. He said Harrington's name again.

Jim Harrington frowned. He could sense that something was wrong but couldn't understand what it was. "Surprised to see me, McBride?" he asked quietly.

McBride stepped forward and thrust out his hand. "I thought you were dead, Jim. I didn't—come over here a minute."

Seizing his arm, McBride led him away from the group on the platform. A little beyond the station he stopped. "You've been sick," he guessed. "What happened?"

"Horse rolled over on me," Harrington answered. "Crushed my chest a little."

"Where?"

"Near the Red river when I was on my way to Texas. I don't remember much of what happened afterwards but someone must have shipped me to Chicago. When I began to take an interest in things, I was in a hospital there. I wrote Jeb Carson."

"Jeb Carson is dead."

"Dead?"

McBride nodded. "Mullarkey shot him. Three months ago, I guess."

"Three months ago? But I got a letter from him last month."

"Not from Jeb Carson. I saw him buried, Jim."

Harrington stared toward the town. Half a dozen horses were tied to the rail in front of the Cattleman's Bar and there were a couple of wagons at the side of Baker's store. A light showed from the windows of the Silver Grill. A group of men were standing in front of the hotel. The night was warm.

"Who's runnin' my ranch?" he asked McBride.

"Taft."

"Aaron Taft of the Bar 70?"

"Yes. As I understand it, the court appointed him to look after your place. With Carson dead, and since everyone thought you were dead, something had to be done. At least, that's the way things stand. Only—"

"Only what, McBride?"

McBride hesitated. "Well, Jim, Aaron Taft's been spreadin' out, lately. He's bought the Circle-S and Anderson's place. That gives him all the territory east of Blue Creek. He's bought Bailey's place, too. Bailey was killed. No one knows how it happened."

"Helen Bailey sold out to him, then?"

"No. Taft bought up Bailey's notes at the bank and took the place over when Helen couldn't meet them. Helen's workin' at the Silver Grill. Some folks say she's gonna marry Taft."

Harrington rolled a cigarette. He wondered about that letter he had received

while at the hospital. It had been signed with Jeb Carson's name and had reported that things in general were fine. He didn't know Jeb Carson's handwriting, of course, and the letter could have been sent by someone else. But why? What could have been the purpose?

"Taft in town?" he asked McBride.

The rancher nodded. "I think so. At least, I saw him about an hour back."

"Then I think I'll look him up."

McBride bit his lips. He said slowly, "Yes, I guess that's the thing to do. But take things easy, Jim."

"Why?"

The rancher shrugged. "I'll go with you. Come on."

★

AS HE moved up the main street of Granite, Jim Harrington saw that word of his return had preceded him. Baker came out on the porch of his store and called a greeting and one or two others spoke to him. There was a strange reserve, however, to their welcome. There was something in the attitude of those who spoke to him, that made Harrington a little uneasy. And here and there, men whom he didn't know, eyed him with a curiosity which was provoking, to say the least.

Turning in to the hotel, Harrington bluntly asked the proprietor where he could find Aaron Taft.

The hotelman shook his head. "He rode out of town a while back. Guess he's on the way home."

Jim Harrington frowned. He considered getting a horse, riding after him.

"Why not come out to my place for the night?" McBride suggested.

"Your place? Why not my own?"

"Well, I thought maybe Taft might have a man there who wouldn't know you. Tomorrow—"

"Suppose we eat," Harrington suggested.

McBride looked at him, then looked away. "You go ahead. I'll join you later."

Jim Harrington left the hotel, walked up the street to the Silver Grill. He pushed open the door and entered. The lunch room was vacant but a tinkling bell announced him and a moment later the kitchen door opened and Helen Bailey stepped into the room. She was a young, dark haired, attractive girl, this daughter of Ed Bailey's, and she had taken several steps into the room before she recognized Jim. When she did, she stopped. One hand went to her throat, and all the color drained out of her face.

"Jim," she whispered. "Jim—Jim Harrington. I thought—"

"Thought that I was dead," Harrington finished. "But I'm not, Helen. I'm very much alive."

The girl came swiftly forward. She caught his arm. "Jim, who knows that you're back?"

"Why, everyone, I guess."

"Then that explains it."

"Explains what? What's wrong, Helen?"

"Harry Rudd came in here a few minutes ago, all excited. He hurried over to the table where Mr. Taft was sitting and said something to him. They both rushed out. I—you've got to get away from here, Jim. If you don't—"

"If I don't, what?"

"The same thing will happen to you that happened to my father." The girl was urging him toward the kitchen door.

"Jim, I want to know all about what happened to you. I—I have lots of things to tell you. But right now—"

The warning note of the bell interrupted what the girl was saying and from behind Harrington a heavy voice called out, "Turn around, fella. I've been wantin' to see you mighty bad."

Helen caught her breath. Her body went rigid. Harrington wheeled around. He saw a short, stunted figure just inside the restaurant doorway. The man's face was dark and wrinkled; his eyes were bright. As he stood facing Harrington, his hands brushed the butts of the guns holstered around his waist. This, Harrington realized, was Tex Mullarkey. He had never seen the man before but had heard him described. Down in the Brazos country he was reputed to be without equal in the use of his guns.

"Well?" Harrington asked dryly.

Mullarkey moved forward into the room. "Harrington," he grated, "a while back you shot a man named Davis. Davis was a friend of mine."

"Davis was a rustler," he answered. "I caught him stealing cattle on my range."

The gunman shrugged. "You shot him. That's all I care about. Any time you want to reach for your gun, go ahead an' start the ball."

There was a cold finality to Mullarkey's voice. The little man's body was bent forward, every muscle rigid. Harrington was aware of a tickling sensation in his throat. He could feel his body tightening. The thought came to him that in another moment he would be lying on the floor, never to rise again.

Months before, he might have had a bare chance with a man of Mullarkey's caliber, but the cast now over his chest crippled the action of his arm. There wasn't a chance in a million that he could beat Mullarkey to the draw.

"Mullarkey! Don't move!"

The order, sharp and harsh, came from the door behind the gunman. Another man stood there, a tall young man. He held a gun in each hand.

"Don't move, Mullarkey," he said again, "for as sure as you do, I'll let you have it."

Perspiration showed on the gunman's face. He licked his lips.

"Harrington," said the man in the doorway, "get out the back way. You'll find a horse. I'll join you."

Jim Harrington hesitated. He felt Helen pulling on his arm; heard her whispering something.

"Go on," ordered the man. "Give yourself a chance to find out what this is all about before it's too late."

The advice was sound. Harrington turned. He hurried through the kitchen door and Helen went with him. There were two saddled horses outside.

"That's Andy Fuller," Helen said swiftly. "He's all right. He'll tell you what I would have told you. Jim, I've got to—"

A man came running around the side of the restaurant. "Come on, Harrington," he called. "Let's get out of here, pronto!"

Harrington swung into the saddle of the nearest horse. He followed Andy Fuller out of town at a gallop which sent sharp pains searing through his chest.

CHAPTER TWO

The Buzzards Begin to Circle

SEVERAL miles north of Granite, Andy Fuller pulled up his horse and turned in the saddle to face Jim Harrington. "Sorry I had to horn in," he said slowly, "but that man in the restaurant was Tex Mullarkey. He's a hired killer. It was his job to shoot you down before you learned too much."

Harrington stared at Fuller. He recognized him now as a young chap who had once worked for Ed Bailey and who, with another man, had started a spread up on the bench country a year before.

"What might I have learned?" he asked.

"Do you want it all at once?"

"All at once."

Fuller nodded. "All right. In the past few months the Bar 70 has gobbled up five ranches, the Circle S, the A Over A, the MAT, the Double B, and your place. Taft controls everything east of Blue creek. He's pushed west, now. He's got his eyes on the whole valley."

Harrington frowned. "I understood from McBride that he had been appointed by the court to look after my place."

"Yeah?" Fuller laughed. "How many head of cattle do you reckon you have?"

"Between three and four thousand."

Fuller shook his head "Oh, no. Maybe a dozen scattered here and there throughout the valley. The rest have been sold."

"If they have, the money has been set aside. Taft will have to account for them."

"Not to a dead man, Harrington, an' that's what you're going to be unless you're lucky. Listen. Here's what happened to your place. When the report came out that you had been killed, Mullarkey shot your foreman and Taft got the court, *his* court by the way, to appoint him to look after your place. Within a month all your stock had been rounded up an' sold. Maybe, if a claim was pressed, Taft would have to make an accounting. But if you were to be killed an' no heir showed up, the case could stay in the courts forever."

"Where are my men?"

"Gone—all of 'em. They drifted right after Carson was shot. I saw that killing, by the way. Carson, your foreman, didn't have a chance. Mullarkey deliberately

provoked the fight and shot him down before anyone guessed what was happening."

Harrington drew a deep breath. He stared back toward Granite.

"Here's more," Fuller went on. "Bailey borrowed money at the bank to increase his stock a couple years ago an' Taft bought his notes. With the rising cattle market it looked like Bailey would be able to meet 'em. So what happened? Someone shot him down one night."

"Who?"

"I don't know, but I could make a good guess."

"Why couldn't Helen meet the notes?"

"Well, by the time the valley had settled down from the shock of the murder, it was discovered that most of Bailey's cattle were gone. They were rustled, of course."

"Can you prove all this, Fuller?"

Andy Fuller shook his head. "Nope. When I see buzzards circling around, gettin' lower an' lower, I can't swear that there's somethin' dead on the ground. But I know damn' well there is, an' so do you."

Harrington was silent for a moment, thinking over all that had happened since his return to Granite and thinking of what Fuller had told him. To his mind then, came the memory of that letter he had written his foreman. Someone had received it, for the letter had been answered and signed by Carson's name, after Carson was dead. That one fact alone seemed to bear out all that Fuller had said.

"I'm going back to Granite," Harrington said abruptly.

"Why?"

"I want to see a man."

Fuller shook his head. "Look here, Harrington, I meant every word I told you. If you go back to Granite—"

"No one will expect me back, Fuller. And what I want to do won't take long."

Andy Fuller shrugged. "All right, we'll both go back. It was just a couple weeks ago that Taft took over the MAT. That puts him right up against my place. Of course, my place ain't much, but I've worked like hell on it. Besides, I got another matter on my mind."

"What is it, Fuller?"

Andy Fuller scowled. "A week ago Red disappeared. Red was my partner. He started off for Granite but didn't ever get there. Come on. Let's ride!"

★

COMING into Granite by a roundabout way, Harrington pulled up in the yard behind Baker's store. He dismounted and hitched his horse to the fence.

"I'm going in here," he said to Andy Fuller. "I'll only be a few minutes."

"Mind if I go along?" Fuller asked.

Harrington shook his head. He walked around to the side door and opened it. Lamps were still burning in the store but there were no customers inside. Baker was in his office, working at his desk.

Harrington walked that way. "Hello, Baker," he nodded. "Any mail for me?"

The storekeeper looked up, startled. He half got to his feet, then sank back into his chair again. The muscles of his face worked convulsively.

"Well?" Harrington insisted "How about it?"

Baker's jaw wagged up and down. "I've been turnin' your mail over to Taft," he managed finally. "The judge told me—"

"What about the letter I wrote to Jeb Carson? Did Taft get that letter too?"

Baker nodded. He glanced nervously from side to side.

Harrington smiled. "So you recognized my handwriting, eh? So you knew I wasn't dead."

The storekeeper made no answer.

"Who mailed the reply?" Harrington demanded.

"I—I don't know."

Jim Harrington took out his gun. He said very quietly, "Baker, I always do what I say I'll do. You know that. And as surely as I'm standing here, I'm going to shoot you if you don't answer my question. Who mailed me a letter from this town, addressed to a Chicago hospital?"

The skin of Baker's face took on a greenish tinge. He swallowed a couple of times, then as Harrington's hand tightened on the gun, managed to gasp out Taft's name.

"And did Taft tell you to keep still about the fact that I was alive?" Harrington asked.

Baker nodded.

There was a sound at the front door.

A man came into the store, but backed quickly out.

"Who was that?" Harrington asked.

"Rudd, one of Taft's men," Fuller replied. He saw us, I guess."

Harrington shrugged. He looked back at Baker. What the storekeeper had told him seemed to cinch things. Taft had known he was alive when he received his letter and Taft had answered it, signing the name of the dead foreman. Recalling that reply, Harrington remembered how the letter had cautioned him not to hurry back until he was completely cured. Undoubtedly, Taft hadn't expected him so soon.

Still staring at Baker, he said grimly, "I ought to shoot you anyhow. If it wasn't for your wife and kids, I would. Baker, don't ever let that boy and girl of yours learn what kind of a man they have for a father."

He turned abruptly away, moved back to the side door and stepped outside. A shot stabbed at him from the shadows to the left. It thudded into the building just inches from his head. Harrington ducked. He lifted his gun and fired in answer. Fuller pushed him from the door. "Hurry! Get back to the horses."

Another shot blasted from the direction of the street and then another. Harrington turned that way. He leveled his gun and fired three times. He heard a man scream and fall heavily to the ground. Fuller was standing over to one side, a gun in each hand, both spitting lead. A shadowy figure ran from the side of the store to the street and there stumbled and sprawled into the dust.

The firing stopped. Harrington edged forward. He bent over the figure of the first man he had hit and then moved on to the street and knelt at the side of the other fellow.

Men charged out of the Cattleman's bar and from the Four Corners saloon and from the hotel. Sam Post, the sheriff, as fat as ever, came waddling down the street.

"What's goin' on here? What's happened?" he demanded as he came up to where Harrington was kneeling.

Harrington looked up. "You figure it out, Post," he said flatly. "You're the sheriff."

The man in the street groaned. He tried to sit up. His trousers were bloodstained from a wound in the thigh.

"Harry Rudd?" gasped the sheriff.

Harrington made no answer. He got to his feet and started back toward the horses. Andy Fuller was waiting at the corner of the store, talking to Helen Bailey.

Harrington nodded to her and to Fuller and walked on past them to the rear of the store. As he was mounting, Fuller caught up with him.

"Where now?" Fuller asked.

"Who's Harry Rudd?"

"He came up here with Mullarkey. He was working with Taft."

A thin, bitter smile touched Jim Harrington's lips. He said nothing more. Wheeling his horse, he rode swiftly down the street.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Cheater

A MILE from town, Jim Harrington made a half circle to the west and south and finally came to a road following the winding course of Blue creek. He turned up this toward the distant mountains. He rode more slowly, now. The pale half of a moon showed in the sky and coupled with the stars, gave off a dim radiance. This was a familiar road; he had travelled it hundreds of times. Here and there, as he followed it, his eyes made out familiar landmarks.

After a while he left the road and cut across the country. He climbed a little hill, dropped down into a valley and then climbed another hill. He was on his own range, now. He had settled here six years before, bringing his own trail herd up from Texas. Since then he had come a long ways. That first herd had been fattened and sold and he had brought up another and then another. To his first crude one room shack he had added two more rooms. He had built a barn, corral, and finally a bunkhouse two years before when he found he had reached the place where he could use several men.

But now, if he was to believe what Andy Fuller had told him, all that was lost. Taft, taking advantage of his absence, had

moved in and taken over his range and his cattle.

Harrington uttered a short, mirthless laugh and his hand, reaching down to the gun at his side, loosened it in its holster. He recalled, suddenly, his early experiences on the long trail and in this valley. In those days, gun-rule had been the only law and he had lived by it, defending what was his own. It seemed those days had come back again.

At the top of a long hill he came suddenly to a place from which he could see his ranch house. It was nestled in a narrow valley close to a wooded slope and near a broad stream which ran into Blue creek. A light showed from one of its windows and two saddled horses were tied to the corral fence. For a while, Jim Harrington studied the scene. The presence of the saddled horses so late at night, meant, he judged, that two men had either just arrived at the ranch or were preparing to leave it. But at any rate, someone was up and that was enough. This was his home and he meant to take possession of it again.

He rode down the hill to the ranch house yard, dismounted, tied his horse to the corral fence near the other two and turned toward the door. It opened suddenly and in the entrance, two men appeared. One of them, he saw at once, was Aaron Taft. Taft was a short, heavy set man with bulging shoulders and a little round head. He was beginning to get fat. Harrington didn't know the other man. Harrington had started for the house but as the two men appeared, he stopped.

Taft's words came to him: "I don't think there's much chance he'll show up, but if he does, you know what to do."

From within the house, someone made an answer which Harrington couldn't catch.

Taft nodded. He said "I'll show you," and stepped back into the house.

The other man looked after him, then swung around, crossed the porch and started across the yard toward the corral. He had taken half a dozen steps before he saw Harrington. When he did see him he stopped suddenly, his body stiffening.

"Who's there?" he rapped out, harshly.

Harrington breathed his name, watching the man closely.

The man half turned. His arm jerked to his side and then up into the air and moonlight glinted on the steel barrel of his gun.

Harrington drew and fired in almost the same instant. He felt the wind of the man's bullet as it whistled past his head, heard the man scream, then stumble and fall to the ground.

Inside the house someone put out the lamp and an orange streak of light lanced through the doorway. Harrington ducked and ran toward the barn. A bullet kicked up sand in front of him and another tugged at the shoulder of his coat.

"Wait a minute," called Taft's voice. "Wait a minute. Harrington, is that you?"

"Sure it's me," Harrington answered. "Come on outside. Let's make a party of it."

"There's been a mistake, Harrington," Taft answered. "Come on up to the house. I'll explain it."

Staring from side to side, Jim Harrington could make out several dark figures creeping away from the rear of the house. He broke his gun, replaced the spent shell and shouted, "Light the lamp, Taft. I don't like dark houses."

After a moment's delay a light showed from the windows of the house and Taft's figure appeared in the doorway. Harrington raised his gun and then lowered it. He had to admire Taft's courage. The man was making a supreme bluff. If it hadn't been for those figures he had seen creeping away from the house—

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"Well, Harrington," Taft called. "Come on up. What's the matter?"

Harrington looked to the right. There was a man crouching close to the earth near the corral fence. If he walked forward he would pass close to that man. A single shot and it would be all over for him.

Swinging his gun toward that crouching figure, Harrington asked, "What about that letter you sent me, Taft? The one to which you signed Jeb Carson's name?"

Taft shook his head. "I don't know what you mean? What letter?"

A sound to the left attracted Harrington's attention. Those men were closing in, guided by the sound of his voice. He crouched lower, then fired suddenly at the shadow near the corral fence. An answering shot flamed back at him and from the left two more shots passed above his head. The light in the house went out again and Taft disappeared. Harrington threw a shot at the door of the house. He turned around and raced to the back of the barn.

"Don't let him get away," Taft was shouting. "Keep him away from the corral. Watch the horses."

Harrington smiled grimly. Taft's bluff had failed and now the man was out in the open. There would be no more pretense. Alive, he represented a danger which Taft couldn't face. Only Harrington's death would satisfy the man.

Someone came creeping around the far end of the barn. Harrington fired at the man. A shot roared back and a sharp pain stabbed through his shoulders. The shock of the bullet drove him against the barn. He slid to his knees. Another shot splintered into the wood near his head.

"I've got him," a man yelled. "I've got him."

Footsteps pounded from the direction of the house. More men started calling to each other. Harrington suddenly realized that he was lying flat on his back. He tried to get up but couldn't make it. His mind began to cloud.

Taft's voice came from directly above him. "We'll make sure of it this time. Jake give me your gun."

Harrington stared up. He could make out the figure of Aaron Taft bending over him. He saw a gun in Taft's hand. The gun was pointed directly at his chest.

Twice it exploded.

The pain in Harrington's chest seemed to spread throughout his body. It blotted out all conscious thought. . . .

Taft straightened. He handed the gun back to the man from whom he had borrowed it. "That finishes him," he said bluntly. "Get my horse."

Two of the men standing near by made wry faces and turned away. Those two men were to climb on their horses and ride out of the valley, never to return. But one of the other men asked, "What do we do with him, Taft?"

Aaron Taft shrugged. "Leave him layin' right here. Drag Peters over near him. It'll look like they got each other. I'll drop a hint to the sheriff. The rest of you head for the Bar 70."

Someone led up Aaron Taft's horse and Taft mounted. He stared down at Harrington for a moment then looked blankly away. . . .

From the crest of a hill overlooking the ranch, Andy Fuller watched the Bar 70 men leave. He said to Helen Bailey, "Well, there they go, or at least a part of them. You stay here. I'll ride down an' see what happened."

Helen Bailey shook her head. "I said I was going with you Andy and I meant it. Do you think Jim—"

Fuller's lips tightened. "I don't know. He headed north when he left Granite but maybe he swung back this way. If he did that firing we heard means that it's all over."

The girl drew a deep breath. She said in a low, unsteady voice, "No, Andy. Things wouldn't happen that way."

Andy Fuller looked at the girl and then looked away. After a moment he said, "They're gone now. Let's ride down an' see what happened."

Nearing the barn, Andy Fuller caught sight of two figures lying on the ground. He spurred his horse to a gallop, then reined in at the barn and swung from the saddle. In another moment he was bending over Jim Harrington.

"Get that white cloth I have in my saddle bag," he called to Helen. "And

the alcohol. It's a little bottle, all wrapped up."

Helen brought him the alcohol and bandage. "Is he—"

"He's still alive," Fuller reported, "but there's a nasty wound in his shoulder. Two more in his chest, it seems, but there's a heavy cast over the chest. I don't think those two are bad."

Swabbing out the wound, Fuller bandaged it. Then he glanced around at Helen Bailey. "What are we going to do? We can't leave him here. We can't take him to town. If we took him to town it would be like turning him over to Taft."

"He's got to have a doctor."

Fuller stared down at the wounded man. "Helen, do you see what this means," he said slowly. "Taft has declared himself at last. If we can save Harrington it means Taft is forced into the open. McBride, Orchard and all the other small ranchers will line up against him. We've got to save Harrington. With Harrington alive and after what's happened, there can be no question as to where Taft stands."

Helen Bailey leaned forward. "What can I do, Andy?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Lynch Law

JIM HARRINGTON turned restlessly on his blankets. He stared up through the leaves of the tree sheltering him. It was growing dark again. Another day had almost ended. This was the tenth since he had wakened up here, far back in the Padua hills. He sat up and was again troubled by the dizziness which always came over him when he wasn't lying down.

"You shouldn't do that, you know," Helen Bailey said reprovingly.

Harrington turned and glanced at the girl. Her dress was dirty and torn and scratches showed on her bare arms. She was leaning against a tree, frowning.

"I feel stronger," Harrington said. "Really, I do."

The girl crossed over to where he sat and dropped down at his side. "Andy ought to be here tonight," she mentioned. "He said he would only be gone two days."

Harrington lay back on the blankets. "He's a fine young chap, that Andy Fuller."

For a long time the girl didn't answer him. Then she said, "Yes, he is, Jim."

Harrington drew a deep breath. He was conscious of a twinge of envy. He rather wished he could change places with Andy Fuller. Women had never before played much of a part in his life. He had been too busy for them, too occupied with his ranch. But during the past ten days, with Helen Bailey almost constantly at his side, he had become acutely aware of her. There had been a period, at first, when he had had the absurd notion that Helen was in love with him and he recalled, now, how excited that had made him feel. During the past few days, however, she had seemed very distant and when she talked of anything it was usually of Andy.

Sitting up again, Harrington stretched out his arms. He held them steady and then nodded. "Another day or two and I can leave here."

The girl shook her head. "Not so soon as that, Jim."

"Conditions won't get any better while I'm lying here. Every day gives Aaron Taft a chance to tighten his hold on my place and on the valley."

The girl made no answer and Harrington's mind turned to the job which lay ahead of him. From a report Andy Fuller had brought from Granite just before he had left on this last trip, Harrington knew that the men of the Bar 70 were searching the range for his body. "Taft still thinks you're dead," Andy had said. "He can't figger it any other way, specially after those two shots he thought he put through your chest."

Harrington lifted a hand to the cast covering his chest. It had turned the bullets which might have taken his life so that they had made only slight wounds. He had played deep in luck. Another time he might not be so fortunate.

Andy Fuller arrived at the hide-out in the Padua hills shortly before midnight but this time did not come alone. Half a dozen other ranchers were with him. McBride was one and Fred Orchard another. Ben Underhill was there and Bill Ford, and Cal Simpson and Dave Saw-

telle. Harrington knew all of them. He stood up as they came trooping into the clearing.

"I brought some men to see you, Jim," Fuller mentioned. "We've been talkin' things over. Got a notion or two."

Jim Harrington managed a grin. Why Andy had brought these men he could guess, but he had his own plans for what lay ahead and the ranchers didn't figure in it. Even Andy Fuller didn't figure in what he meant to do.

McBride stepped forward. "Harrington," he said bluntly, "Andy Fuller, here, has told us what happened. I guess it's opened our eyes."

Harrington glanced at Andy Fuller and Fuller nodded. "I told about the letter you got in the hospital, what Baker said about who wrote the letter an' what happened at your ranch when you rode out there."

"Taft's been after me to sell out to him," Orchard mentioned. "He talked to me the other day in Granite. When I turned him down cold he walked across the street and pointed me out to Mullarkey. I'm not gunfighter, Harrington, but I can use a gun."

Harrington frowned. "What do you propose to do?"

"Get our men together and ride to the Bar 70," McBride answered. "Have it out with Taft."

"That would mean a range war, McBride. It would cost more than it would be worth."

"Then what do we do?" Bill Ford asked hotly. "Just sit back and let Taft take over our places."

"No. You don't have to do that. Just look at the thing logically. Put yourself in Taft's place. He's gone land crazy, I know, but not so crazy as to make a bid for the whole valley all at once. After all, he doesn't want to kill you all to get your outfits. He wants the thing to at least look legal. Orchard, your land and Andy's, with mine, will give him the whole southwest end of the valley. He'll move that way first. I don't think the rest of you have anything to worry about."

"But if we don't stop him—"

"We'll stop him, but we'll stop him legal."

"How?"

"Well, first of all, there's my case. Then there's the question of what happened to Bailey and to Andy's partner. We will send someone to Kansas City to get a U.S. marshal in here. We'll lay the facts before him. I know that doesn't sound very forceful, but in the end, it's the safest plan."

The men facing him scowled and Harrington added, "Most of you are married and have families. You owe them something."

"What are you going to do?" McBride insisted.

"Wait here until I'm stronger," Harrington answered. "Next week or next month will do as well for me as tomorrow."

As he spoke, Harrington glanced toward Helen Bailey. He hadn't talked this way to her and he wondered what she thought of what he was saying now.

"How about me?" Orchard asked.

"Stall," Harrington answered. "Tell Taft you might sell. Start to dicker with him about the price. And you, Andy, stay away from him and from Mullarkey."

Harrington could see that the men, though unwilling to admit it, were impressed by his advice. He leaned back against a tree and listened to them come around to it through discussion of their own. After a while, they left.

When they had gone, Andy Fuller was shaking his head. "It might work, that plan of yours," he muttered, "but if it was up to me I'd rather ride on the Bar 70."

Harrington made no answer. He intended to do just that but he didn't intend to provoke any range war. After all, his own common sense told him that Taft couldn't spread out over the whole valley. Most of those men whom Andy had brought to see him were in no danger at all. He had no right to drag them into a fight which was his.

"It'll work," he said to Andy.

Andy Fuller turned away. "I brought some supplies," he stated. "I figure you're still safe here. I'm ridin' away tonight. I've got a hunch about Red."

Harrington nodded. He saw Andy start away. Helen Bailey walked off with him through the trees, talking to him earnestly as soon as they were out of earshot.

Turning back, Harrington laid down on his blankets. He got to thinking about Helen and Andy and it was a long time before he fell asleep.

★

IT WAS the next day that Ben Underhill returned. His arrival was unexpected and abrupt. And the information he brought changed all Jim Harrington's plans.

"Andy Fuller's been arrested," Underhill blurted. "The sheriff's holdin' him in Granite but he won't be holdin' him after tonight. At least, not from the talk I heard."

Harrington straightened up. From where he stood he could see Helen Bailey. There was a tight, strained expression on the girl's face.

"Why was he arrested?" Harrington demanded.

"Someone found Red's body. They say Fuller killed him."

Helen Bailey stepped forward. "Red and Andy were like brothers," she said tensely. "Everyone knows that. Andy would—Andy would have died for Red."

Underhill nodded. "I guess you're right, girl, but people sometimes have a way of forgettin' things."

"Who found Red's body?" asked Harrington.

"A couple of the Bar 70 riders."

Harrington's lips tightened. "And what did you mean about the sheriff not holdin' him after tonight?"

"There's a crowd of the Bar 70 men in town. They're talkin' ugly. If they try to take him away from the sheriff they won't have much trouble."

Harrington turned away. He moved over to where their horses were tied. Andy had brought those horses. He owed Andy a lot, more than he could ever hope to pay. And his course was now clear before him.

Saddling up, he returned to where Underhill and Helen were standing.

"Ben," he said, "you take Helen and ride to McBride's. Have McBride send word to the other men in the valley. Tell them to come to Granite tonight, I guess I had things figured out wrong."

"Where are you going?" Ben demanded.

Jim Harrington smiled. "To Granite, Ben. In a hurry."

HELEN BAILEY called something after him as Harrington rode away but he didn't hear what it was. He cut through the hills and across the plains, taking the most direct route to the town. Once he sighted a group of riders but they were far away and he couldn't identify them. They were heading toward the hills.

Darkness had fallen long before he reached Granite but as he paused at the end of the main street he guessed that nothing serious had yet happened. Several places along the main street he could see groups of men. If Andy Fuller had been taken from the jail, he knew that those groups wouldn't have been crowding the street.

A mob usually disperses after violence, its individual members slinking into hiding.

Swinging down from his horse, Harrington tied it to a nearby fence and in a roundabout way, approached the jail. The building, a stone structure, was set back from the main street and adjoined the frame building which served as the sheriff's office. Harrington moved around the jail. He stared down the street. More men were in sight and there was an evident restlessness about them. The doors of the Cattleman's bar and the other saloon were constantly swinging open and shut as men passed in and out.

There was a light in the sheriff's office but the curtains were drawn and Harrington couldn't see inside the room. He moved cautiously around to the door, drew his gun, twisted the knob and then pushed the door open.

Sam Post was sitting inside at his desk, playing a game of solitaire. His gun lay at one side. As Harrington came in, he looked up and his face blanched.

"Jim—you—" he gasped. "But—but you—"

Harrington nodded. He moved on into the room and closed the door firmly behind him.

He said, "Yes, Sheriff. Weren't you expecting me?"

The sheriff's hand inched toward his gun.

"Don't try it, Sam," Harrington advised. "Just leave the gun there."

"What do you want, Jim?" the sheriff asked huskily.

"Your prisoner," Harrington answered. "Get your keys."

The sheriff stood up. He backed away. Harrington moved forward. He picked up the sheriff's gun and made sure the sheriff didn't have another.

"All right, Post," he ordered, "go let him out and hurry it up."

"You—you can't do a thing like this, Jim. The law—"

"Unlock that jail," Harrington snapped.

The sheriff turned around and started fumbling with the lock which opened a door to the stone building. Behind him and from the street, Harrington became aware of the rumbling sound of voices. He backed to the street door and leaned against it.

Finally managing the lock, Post moved into the jail and in another moment Andy Fuller stepped into the office. Post followed him. Fuller's face was pale and there were angry lines showing around his mouth.

From outside, a loud voice shouted, *"Open up, Post! We want Fuller!"*

Other voices took up the cry.

"Put out the lamp, Post," Harrington snapped.

The sheriff blinked. He moistened his lips. Fuller stepped over and put out the lamp. An angry howl sounded from outside the building. Harrington raised a blind. He stared through the window. Close to thirty men, he estimated, were in the crowd outside the jail. Not all of them, of course, were Bar 70 men. Some were men from other branches, some were men from the town. All were armed. There was no chance for him and Andy Fuller to escape. They couldn't possibly get through the crowd and there was no back way out of the jail.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hot Lead or a Hangnoose

"LOOKS like a party, doesn't it," Fuller murmured.

Jim Harrington nodded.

"Jim," Fuller asked, "what did you horn in for? Why didn't you stay away?"

"Seems to me like you horned in a couple times, so far as I was concerned," Harrington answered.

The crowd outside surged forward, again clamoring for Andy Fuller. Harrington swung around toward Post. He shoved his gun against the man's side. "Open the front door," he ordered, "An' call for Taft. Say you want to talk to him an' don't say anything else."

"You—you mean face those men?" Post gasped.

Harrington jabbed him with the gun. "Yes."

He urged the sheriff toward the door and made him open it. He kept close behind the man but still in the shadows of the room.

A silence fell over the crowd as the sheriff appeared and then from several places men called, "Where's Fuller, Sheriff? We want Fuller."

"Go ahead, Post," Harrington ordered.

In a rather unsteady voice, Sam Post called for Aaron Taft and from one side of the crowd, Taft appeared.

"What is it, Sam?" Taft asked.

The sheriff beckoned with his arm and after a moment's hesitation, Taft came forward. "What is it?" he asked again.

Sensing something unusual, the crowd edged closer and from inside the door, Jim Harrington said suddenly, "Aaron Taft. Do you recognize my voice?"

Taft stiffened and a sharp tension fell over the crowd.

"Harrington?" Taft breathed.

Jim Harrington laughed softly. He said, "Yes, Taft. And in another moment I'm going to step through the door. When I do, maybe you better go for your gun."

The men in the crowd couldn't see him but Harrington's voice was loud enough for them to catch his words. Those standing near Taft, backed away and here and there, men repeated Harrington's name in tones which mirrored their surprise.

Fuller whispered, "Don't, Jim. Don't step out there."

Harrington shook his head. His eyes were on Aaron Taft. Taft's body was crouched forward, one hand inches above his gun. His eyes were riveted on the doorway.

Harrington stepped quietly forward. He

saw Taft's hand slap at his gun, saw him jerk it up and lifting his own gun he fired twice. Taft's body jerked. The man's gun fell from his hand and raising his arms he clawed at his chest and throat. Blood trickled over his fingers. His eyes glazed. Half turning, he fell heavily to the ground, one arm twisted under his body.

The silence which followed those shots beat against Jim Harrington's ears. He stared down at Taft and realized that the man was dead. His land grabbing days were over. It was an ending something such as this which Harrington had known was the only possible solution.

Facing the crowd, Harrington said slowly, and hardly realizing he was making a speech. "He had it coming to him. He knew I wasn't dead but he took over my place. When I returned he tried to kill me. If he could talk, the mystery of Ed. Bailey's death could probably be explained. He was land crazy, money crazy. He even had you men believing Andy Fuller killed his partner and best friend. When—"

"Harrington!" interrupted a voice from one side.

Jim Harrington turned. Over near the corner of the jail he saw the figure of Tex Mullarkey. Mullarkey wasn't alone. Near him were half a dozen other Bar 70 riders. In the half light, Harrington couldn't see Mullarkey's face very clearly but from the man's attitude he knew what to expect. Others knew, too, for again there was a general movement in the crowd as men got out of the line of fire.

"What is it, Mullarkey?" Harrington asked.

Tex Mullarkey moved slowly forward. There was a deadly menace in his approach. Half a dozen paces from where Harrington waited he came to a stop.

"Harrington," he said bluntly. "There's a little matter we didn't finish the other day an' now there's more to add to it. Taft was a friend of mine, too. When you're ready, go for your gun."

There was a movement at Harrington's side as Andy Fuller from the doorway of the jail lined up near him. To the left of Mullarkey, the other Bar 70 riders were watching closely. One man already had a hand on his gun.

Harrington could feel his muscles tightening. This move on the part of Mullarkey and the Bar 70 riders, of course was inevitable. For their own safety, they didn't dare let him live and push his accusations. He was as dangerous to them as he had been to Taft.

A faint drumming sound reached his ears and the thought came to him that probably the men from McBride's ranch were riding toward the town. They would get here, he knew. They would get here in time to mop up. But not in time to stop this. Mullarkey would have his way first.

"Andy," he heard himself saying, "keep out of this."

Andy Fuller made no answer but he didn't move away.

"Reach for your gun Harrington," Mullarkey grated. "Reach for it—*now!*"

Harrington saw the little man's arm stiffen and then saw his hand claw for his gun. His own arm was moving, too. Swiftly, desperately. But Mullarkey's gun came up, and he saw it belch fire before his own had cleared it's holster. Something seemed to hurl him backwards. He reeled against the doorway of the sheriff's office. His own gun kicked back in his hand. He had been hit he knew that. But he was still standing and firing at Mullarkey.

A gun was roaring at his side, Fuller's gun. He saw one of the Bar 70 riders go down, saw another drop his weapon and grab at his stomach. Beyond them, men were coming up the street, yelling and firing. McBride's voice reached him. He heard Orchard yelling and heard the deep booming tones of Ben Underhill.

Every detail of the scene there in the street was etched forever into his memory, the scattering of the crowd as the ranchers came riding up, the fleeing of the Bar 70 men, the flat expressionless look on Mullarkey's face as he stood his ground, emptied his guns, reloaded them and started firing again. Mullarkey had been hit. He was sure of it. But bullets didn't seem to harm the man. He was inhuman.

At his side, Andy Fuller choked, staggered and fell to his knees. Harrington stared down at him, then looked at Mullarkey. He leveled his gun at Mullarkey and again pulled the trigger. Mullarkey was rocking back and forth on his heels. His hands were lowering, seemingly weighted down by his guns. Two men dashed between them and then more men

crowded around. McBride was bending over Andy Fuller. Harrington holstered his gun. On the ground, between Underhill's legs, he could see Mullarkey's head. Mullarkey was down.

"He's hit bad. Get the Doc," McBride was calling.

Doc Weatherby came pushing forward and knelt at Andy's side. Harrington straightened up. He pushed himself away from the door. His luck had held again. Once more a bullet intended to take his life had been turned away by the steel ribs of the bandage across his chest.

Several of the men picked up Andy Fuller and started carrying him toward the hotel. Others had cornered four of the Bar 70 riders and McBride headed toward them. Underhill had been kneeling at Mullarkey's side. He got up, mopping his brow. "I never saw anything like it," he muttered. "One bullet's enough for most men but it took almost a dozen to knock Mullarkey off of his feet."

Harrington followed over to the hotel and waited in the small lobby for a report on Andy Fuller. Helen Bailey came in and crossed to where he was standing. "Andy," she asked tensely, "is he—"

Harrington told her where they had taken Andy and watched her move that way. He was still staring after her when McBride came in.

"I guess it's all over," McBride stated. "One of those men of Taft's broke down when he felt a rope around his neck. Harry Rudd shot Ed Bailey and shot Andy's partner, too. Taft ordered it. We're givin' the Bar 70 men, all but Rudd, until mornin' to get out of the valley. The court, and a court which will be honest this time, will make good as many losses as possible out of the stock and money Taft had. Does that sound right?"

Jim Harrington shrugged. "Anything's all right. I only hope that Andy—"

The doctor came down the corridor. "Andy'll pull through," he promised. "It's a clean wound. A few weeks in bed an' he'll be as well as ever."

Jim Harrington felt as though a very heavy weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Something very much like the old smile came back to his face. He said, "That's fine, Doc. That's fine." And then he turned to McBride, "When I first came back," he reminded the rancher, "you offered to put me up for a while. Mind if I go out to your place tonight?"

McBride looked surprised but shook his head. "Of course not, Jim."

Harrington thanked him and turned outside. He was grateful for the chance to go to McBride's. Somehow or other he didn't want to be alone tonight.

A footstep behind him caused him to turn and in the doorway of the hotel he saw the girl. There was a faint smile on her lips.

"I'm glad Andy isn't badly hurt," Harrington said. "Glad for both of you."

"For both of us, Jim?" asked the girl.

"Yes."

Moving closer to him, Helen Bailey shook her head. "Jim, do you think that Andy and I—that we—"

From the look on Harrington's face the girl must have read his thoughts, for a flush of color came into her cheeks.

Jim Harrington was aware of a thrill of excitement pounding in his veins. He heard himself say," Helen you mean—?"

"Yes, Jim," said the girl quietly, so quietly that he hardly heard her.

Unmindful of the men in the street or of McBride who had just come out on the porch, Jim Harrington reached out and took Helen in his arms. Everything was cleared up, finished, McBride had said. But Harrington knew that McBride had been wrong. For him, at least, and for Helen, this was just the beginning.

THE END

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE—

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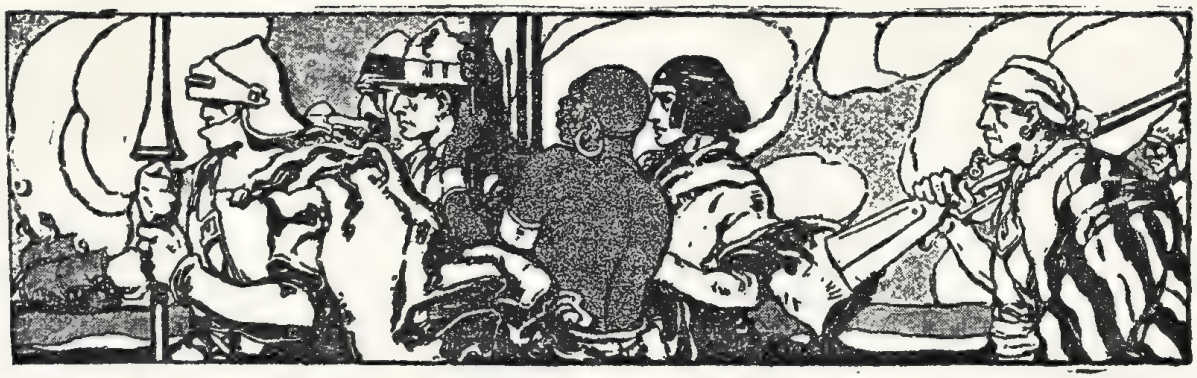

BIGGER . . .

The editors of ADVENTURE MAGAZINE have finally been able to heed, with something more concrete than mere wishful thinking, the pleas of so many of you that we increase the size of your magazine "even if the price has to go up a little, too." So, beginning with the August issue, you'll find a hundred and sixty-two pages instead of the hundred and thirty you've had to be content with for a good many years. That means an additional thirty thousand words of copy, approximately, plus many more illustrations. The price of the magazine will be a quarter in the future. And now—as a partial preview of the issue next to appear—here's why we think it will be . . .

BETTER THAN EVER

"THE FLEET IN THE FOREST"

By Carl D. Lane

—opens the August issue. In the first of four gripping installments we meet Chid Alwyn, apprentice shipwright, whose personal code was "profits first and the devil take the country." Oliver Hazard Perry, recruiting men to help construct a fleet with which to fight the British on Lake Erie, tries to win Chid over. But instead of heading north with Perry, Chid slips aboard the schooner *Blessed Cause*, half privateer, half pirate, lured by the promise of quick riches. It's crimson gold he garners, however, for the schooner proves a blood-ship, and Alwyn—before he sights land again—is a wanted man with a charge of participating in murder and mutiny hanging over his head.

"TEMPORARY STARS"

By E. Hoffmann Price

American-led guerilla bands in the Philippines still surge forth from their jungle bases in the mountains of Moro-land to raid the Japs with *kris* and *kampilan*. Kane, Datu Ryan and Bishop Jackson—that fabulous trio born in "Last Boat from Zamboanga"—are all present to help pin the temporary stars of general on Kane's shoulders as he leads his ragged commandos through the bloody *cogon* grass.

"THE FORGE OF OLVIR BIGMOUTH"

By DeWitt Newbury

In which the clock turns back to the heyday of the Viking rovers when their long-boats cleaved the waves from the Skagerrak to Iceland, and every warrior's code had but one law—*"It is better to die like a man than live like a thrall."*

* * * * * * *

On the short story roster HUGH WILEY gives us "Steamboat Man," an amusing yarn of the Turkey Slough country in floodtime. . . . PEIRSON RICKS, in "Caissons in the Sky," illustrates the military maxim—"There's always a back door to the enemy's camp." . . . RAY MILLHOLLAND takes us to a foxhole on a South Pacific island to watch a couple of Leatherneck sharpshooters match "Shot for Shot" with a Nip sniper. . . . WILLIAM MARSHALL RUSH, WALTER ALDRICH TENNEY, PAUL EMILE MILLER, LESLIE T. WHITE also join the ranks of our Writers' Brigade with fiction, facts and verse. . . . Plus the usual departments and features you've grown to look forward to each month only in—

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The August issue is on sale today!

THE BAR V SHOVES 'EM NORTH!

When Dan Smith signed on as trail-boss with Monte Vidor's Dodge-bound herd, he was playing his own deadly game. . . . Betting out his six-shooter hand against a ranch-girl's courage, for a fabulous northern cattle empire!

CHAPTER ONE

Texas Heads Up the Trail

THE young cowpuncher called Dan Smith was standing against an adobe building on the main street of El Paso. The town was running wild. The railroad was coming, and cattle was

As Dan swung and came up, carrying the knife-man, he was under Creaky's blazing gun. . . .

Gripping Trail-Drive Novel

By WILLIAM R. COX

king. The saloons and gambling halls were burgeoning with noise and the clatter of coin. Dan Smith stood in the shade and watched the overlords of this frontier world pass to and fro.

Dan Smith wore clean jeans and immaculate boots and a loose jacket over a dull blue shirt. His Stetson was weathered, but not broken. He had a smooth, enigmatic face, with eyebrows which arched almost delicately. His nose had been broken and badly set. His thumbs were in his cartridge belt, his fingers tapping an interminable rhythm across the brass studs.

Hongkong Price went by, his voice booming like thunder, talking in high numbers to Lem Slattery. Bison Peary and Cham Letwiler went into a saloon. The cattle barons were gathering in preparation for the big drives northward. Money was plentiful—banker's money, for the

cattlemen operated upon credit, mainly. Cigars spewed smoke, hard liquor went down leather throats. And Dan Smith watched and waited.

Two cowpunchers weaved out of the Star and back-slapped each other with loud guffaws. One drew a gun and loosed it at the sky, whooping a long yell. The other laughed heartily. They danced in their boots, awkwardly flinging their arms as the board walk resounded to their nonsense.

A tall man came from the hotel and waited a moment. He wore the most formal of Eastern clothing, immaculately pressed and evidently quite new. Only the cream-colored sombrero distinguished him from any eastern dude come to behold the wonders of the fabulous Border town. Dan Smith's fingers stopped drumming upon his belt.

The tall man's mustache was trimmed and pointed with wax. He wore sideburns, and he moved with great ease and grace, turning, smiling indulgently. A woman came from another door and went to meet him.

The woman wore white and the sweep of the long skirt did not disguise her shapely stride. She was fair, and as she raised the parasol a pink glow suffused her features, making her seem very young and lush and eager. She put her fingers beneath the elbow of the tall man, and they came down towards the spot where Dan Smith and the cavorting cowboys barred their path.

The tall man stopped, still smiling, watching the antics of the waddies. Neither he nor the girl noticed Dan Smith. One of the punchers swung about with a long arm. His hand pushed against the girl, quite roughly, sending her into her companion, knocking them back.

The tall man's coat opened like a door. His right hand flashed beneath his left armpit, and came out holding a revolver.

The second cowboy had already acted. He was crouched, reaching for his weapon. The man who had struck the girl was wheeling to one side, and although he had emptied one gun, another, shorter weapon appeared as if by magic. Both were now perfectly sober.

Dan Smith came away from the wall. His Colt .44 was a whirling, shining machine of action. The shots all came in a row, like a telegraph key tapping a message.

The girl had not moved, Dan noted. The face of the tall man had gone white, but there was no fear in it. It was just intent, serious and cool. The tall man's gun went off. The cowboys both fired.

But Dan Smith had fired first. One puncher fell forward. The other staggered, threw wide his arms, his gun still throwing lead at the sky.

Some people came out and stared. They had expected a scene of revelry, with cowhands carrying on, but they saw bodies in the dust of the street and everyone was running.

The tall man said, "If you will take my sister out of this, sir, I'll handle it."

Dan Smith said, "I think my gun downed them. Maybe I'd better stay."

The tall man smiled bleakly. "I'm Monty Vidor." His speech was clipped, almost foreign. He was not a Texan, yet he was on his way to being the greatest of Texans. He was British born, but he was one of the most potent Americans in El Paso at this particular time. "I'll handle it."

Dan said, "If you reckon. . . . " And made way for the girl through the crowd. They returned to the hotel, and she led him into a small side parlor.

Dan said, "You'll be all right here, Miss Vidor. I'll go back."

She was pale now, and her voice was strained. "Stay. They won't try anything on Monty again. Not in the open. But I —haven't a gun on me just now."

Dan smiled. He was recklessly good-looking when his white teeth showed. "You gener'lly pack a gun?"

She relaxed. She said in a normal, pleasant voice, "If Ty Crexall is in town. You must be a stranger."

"Yes'm," said Dan Smith. "A stranger."

"Those were Crexall men, from the trail crew of the Crooked M," she said wearily. "We didn't recognize them, but there's no doubt. Ty and Monty are feuding. If you were a Texas man, you'd know."

Dan Smith said, "Yes'm. I've been up Wyoming way. And in California. But I heard tell of your brother. And Crexall,

too, for that matter. Names sure get around."

"Two of the biggest men in the cattle business," she said, half to herself. "What a pity! Ty could be a great leader, a great man, if he were honest."

Dan Smith said wryly, "Yes'm. We all could be. If we were honest."

★

SHE looked at him, as though seeing him for the first time. She said, "I haven't thanked you. I don't even know your name!"

The door banged open and Monty Vidor came in with a man wearing a star on his shirt. The marshal said civily, "I'll have to ask your name, sir."

Vidor said crisply, "He is working for me. I vouch for him completely, do you understand?"

The marshal paid no attention. His name was Ben Crilly and he was honest enough. He was staring at Dan Smith. He began to speak again, then stopped and waited.

"I'm called Dan Smith. The lady was in danger, so I tossed in my chips. I'm trailin' north with Mr. Vidor's big drag—and you can't have my gun."

The marshal coughed and said mildly. "You'll leave town right away, Smith?"

"Immediately," said Vidor impatiently. "We don't want all of Ty Crexall's men shooting at us, you know!"

Crilly shrugged. "Ty's business with you, and yours with him, is out of my bailiwick. All I want's to keep it that away. I'll give you an hour." He bowed to the girl and left.

Monty Vidor strode forward, extending his hand. He said warmly. "You're a fast, cool man. I'll pay you seventy dollars a month if you mean that about trailing north with the Bar V. And if you're as good as I think, you'll be a foreman mighty quick. I treat my men well, Smith; and you're the type I need."

Dan Smith said, "Those are fighting wages. You're feudin' with a tough man. Mebbe I don't want it, Vidor."

The tall man dropped his hand. He said explosively, "Ty Crexall's sold out to Eastern interests. He thinks he'll head a syndicate that can buy all the cattle from Texas and set prices where they want them. Nobody believes this—and I can't prove it. But every independent cattle drover in the West should be on my side."

Dan Smith said, "I'm not exactly a waddy, Vidor. There are easier ways of gettin' along. I was helpin' you stall the officer. I'll be goin' along, now."

The girl cried, "No! He's sharp, Monty! Let him ride with Obie. Make a deal with him—make it worth his while. It might save us!"

Dan paused on the doorsill. Vidor was frowning. He said, "Where are you from Smith? You saved my life—but how do I know I can trust you? Damn this frontier life! There's too much double-dealing!"

"Yeah," said Dan. "There is, ain't there? He waited, without advancing information, a crooked smile on his lips.

"I have a hunch," said the girl. "Eat dinner with us, Mr. Smith. Let Monty talk to you."

Vidor sighed. "Please!" he said urgently. He had winning ways when he chose. He took Dan's arm and led him to the hotel dining room, ushering his sister with the other hand, compelling them both to his will. "I'm going through hell and high water with this herd, and I need help!"

★

MONTY VIDOR drove a spanking pair of bays to the light carriage and Dan Smith rode alongside. They went over the trail to the camp without words.

Last night had been the time for talk. Dan slanted his hat over his eyes, although the sun was behind him and the black horse niggled along without effort. It was a good horse, and the saddle and bridle had cost a lot of money. Dan's rifle was a new repeater.

He cut his eye at the girl. Her name, he knew was Margot. She was really beautiful.

At the camp they all stood around while Monty talked to his foreman, Obie Ferris. Obie had close-set eyes and wore a beard even while off the trail. He was a short man with tremendous shoulders and bowed legs. He listened to his boss and said nothing.

Two other men stayed close to Ferris as Monty Vidor gave his orders. One was a Mexican named Feliz Montero, a slim man with a drooping eyelid. The other was Creaky Lang, an ancient rawhide man who wore two guns tied low around his waist.

The others of the crew were busy. The cook, a hefty man with bulging belly, was carefully gathering his equipment together. The riders all seemed competent to Dan's eye, and he imagined that they could all shoot straight and quick.

Vidor's voice was crisp, commanding, "The Crooked M can't possibly get away today. You start, and go through the Strip and up the Western Trail. You have your orders, and I'll see you in Dodge. This is Dan Smith. He won't stand night guard or do anything unless he's needed. He's just riding."

Obie Ferris turned his snake eyes upon Dan. For a moment they were sullen, resentful, then they went back to Vidor with dog-like obedience.

He said, "Like you say, boss."

Vidor said in softer accents, "Dan downed Greasy and Cholla Nevins yesterday. They had hired out to Ty."

Obie said, "So he's the one. That was a good job, Smith."

Dan said, "Cut me a couple good horses, Ferris, will you? I'll leave it to you—but I'll need good mounts."

Ferris nodded. "You mean to scout a lot, huh?"

"Crexall's herd will be in your rear," said Vidor. "That's bad, in a way. But I need you in Dodge ahead of him. You can't rush the cattle to sore feet, but you've got to make a fast drive. I know you can do it, Obie."

Ferris spat reflectively. "Devlin'll never pass me. Won't even try. My boys have got it on them, boss. Ty hasn't got the men to fight us."

They ate an hour later, sitting in the carriage, just Margot and Monty Vidor and Dan Smith. Dan said, "You got rangey animals out there. They'll walk fast enough. But they'll have to fatten for market."

Vidor said, "I'm not selling them for this year's market. I've—well, I've decided to trust you, Dan."

Margot said, "Yes, tell him."

"There's a ranch in Montana, where beeves really put on weight," said Vidor. "If I can sell this herd to a certain party before Crexall gets to him with his crooked combine deal, I can buy this ranch. My credit is strained, Dan. Ty beat me on a pair of tight deals. My government contract went wrong, thanks to Ty's political connections. It put me in a tight spot. This is my big gamble—but if I winter this herd and send up another, I can get high prices from independent buyers and get out of this Texas deal. Montana is the place to raise beef—Texas is for breeding. Do you understand?"

"Known it for some time," nodded Dan. "And if anything goes wrong with this drive you're licked?"

"It's our last chance!" said Margot. "Crexall can ruin us at the bank if we miss this time."

Dan said, "I see."

"Get them through," said Vidor vehemently, "and you can run the Montana place, the Big B, on shares. I've been looking for a man like you for years, Dan. Smart and tough and honest. I make snap decisions. You're it."

Dan said softly, "I've been lookin' for you, too, Monty."

"Good!" said the girl. "It's a deal, then?"

There was the sound of hoofs and a small cavalcade came into sight around the bend in the trail. The men of the Bar V did not seem to pay any attention, but Creaky and Feliz dropped behind the chuck wagon and drew rifles. Sam, the cook, got busy with a task which required use of a heavy butcher knife. Obie Ferris topped a saddled cayuse and threw a carbine close to his knee. The three in the carriage sat motionless.

The dust blew away and there were five riders coming in. Their horses bore the crooked M brand, and Dan kept his eyes upon the wiry, middle-aged man who rode in the van. He had deep blue eyes and a reckless air of boldness. He wore range clothes, but his neckerchief was of silk, and fastened with a gold pin containing a huge white diamond.

The wiry man rode away from his companions, approaching the carriage, Dan ticked off the four who waited upon Ty Crexall; he knew all by sight. They were

Chink Devlin, the foreman; Lil Slaughter, the gun-slinger; Beany Morgan, a knife-artist and fancy rider, and the one known only as Ryan the mystery man with the pearl-handled .38—a strange gun for a cowman to tote. They were Texans all, but Dan had known them in far places. . . .

Ty Crexall said, "Mornin', Margot; mornin' Monty. I see you hired you another killer."

Dan took hold of the dash of the carriage and leaped lightly over the wheel to the ground. The four men behind Crexall fanned out and Ryan's cheek muscles twitched. Dan kept one eye on Ryan and one on Ty Crexall.

He said sharply, "I'm Dan Smith, and I pack one gun. If you want trouble from me, you can have it right now. Otherwise, shut up that sort of talk, Crexall!"

The wiry man kept his hands folded on his saddle. His men relaxed, their faces stony. Sam's knife rattled on a pan and Monty Vidor's smooth voice said, "You're not on your grounds, Ty. I'd talk soft."

★

CREXALL grinned. He was unafraid, and strong as a longhorn bull, Dan realized. He said, "I didn't come here to fight. I came to see how you were doing. You'll be ahead of us on the trail—and I wanted to wish you luck, Monty."

Vidor said stiffly, "We'll be looking for tricks."

Crexall drawled, "Tricks? From 'way over on the Chisholm? I ain't followin' your gang, Monty. They're too many. We know when we're outnumbered."

Monty Vidor had good control, but Dan could have sworn he was disappointed. He said, "Well, I'm glad to hear you're not tangling with us. At least, not until Dodge."

"Dodge!" grinned Crexall. "Now there's a town! Cowboy capitol of the world. Wonderful place!"

Margot said, "Please, Monty. Let's go back."

The girl was trembling, and Dan was puzzled, watching the two cattle kings and the beautiful young woman. He saw Ty Crexall's glance return again and again to Margot Vidor. Monty was restless. Although he held the situation in his hands, he was not sure of himself. Crexall had disarmed them with his casualness.

Dan deliberately walked in front of Crexall's horse and took Margot's hand. Speaking in a low, tender, voice he said, "Yes, my dear, you should really go back. Go on, Monty, we understand what's needed. I'll see you in Dodge, darling!"

The girl's eyes widened for a moment. Then she gripped Dan's hand tightly and whispered, "Oh, thank you! You *are* very clever. Thank you!"

Monty waved his hand. "See you in Dodge!" He turned the bays and they danced off towards El Paso. Margot turned and put her hand to her lips, then wafted the kiss back over her shoulder.

Dan turned and surveyed Ty Crexall. His blue eyes had turned black, and his face was a dark mask. Ryan's cheek muscles jerked again and all the Crooked M men sat rigid as statues.

Dan said, "You can stay or you can go. I've got things to attend to. So-long, Crexall."

He turned his back on them and walked leisurely away. Crexall's voice came after him, like the hiss of a snake, "I'll see you soon, Smith!"

Dan went on, passing the chuck wagon. He saw Feliz and Creaky with their fingers on their rifle triggers and felt better. He went past the corral and stopped, leaning against the rails, waiting. Saddles creaked, horses moved eastward.

Obie Ferris rode slowly around the edge of the corral and said, "They've vamoosed. What kind o' play were you makin' Smith? Who the hell sent you, anyway?"

"You're excited, or you wouldn't ask questions like that," suggested Dan.

"Excited?" spat Obie. *"Me?"*

Dan said, "About those horses for me—let's cut them now. I got an errand back in town, later."

He selected two more blacks. Men had a prejudice against solid blacks on the range, but Dan wasn't looking for cow-ponies. He got two horses much better than he would have expected and with his favorite Nightshade, they would do him. Obie Ferris was curt and bad-tempered and at nightfall, with everything in readiness for the morning's start, Dan saddled

and rode back along the trail to El Paso.

The town was going full blast. Dan kept to the back ways, out of the light from the gaming houses and saloons and dropped reins behind the Alhambra. He walked to his favorite spot against the wall of the adobe building where the deepest shadows fell. He waited there, motionless.

An hour passed. Ty Crexall came and went along the way without spotting Dan. The wiry man was buying drinks that night. If Dan knew cattlemen, the four riders of the Crooked M would be liquoring up against the long, dry drive northward. The third time Crexall appeared he had Chink Devlin in tow, and the foreman appeared quite drink. Slaughter and Beany Morgan came along a moment later and went into the Alhambra.

Ryan was not drunk. He was walking in the middle of the street, his hand on his gun, going to join the others. He was looking right, then left, cautious as though he were treading through a jungle. Dan ducked into the alley and let Ryan get a pace or two past him, almost to safety.

Then he called, "Jim! I've got you covered!"

Ryan spun, started to draw, then stopped, elevating his hands. His face was white. He said, "What do you want?"

"Just come into the alley for a talk," said Dan softly.

Ryan said, "I'll take it right here."

"No," said Dan. "In the alley."

Ryan stood, making no move, settling himself. Dan slid out of the alley. Ryan let him get fairly close, then went for his weapon in a desperate last second attempt.

★

DAN hit him with the gun muzzle as his left hand blocked Ryan's draw. Immediately he holstered his own weapon and caught the falling man, dragging him across the walk and into darkness. He sat on his heels, then, dangling Ryan's .38's from his forefingers, waiting for the dark man to awaken.

After a while Ryan groaned and struggled to a sitting position. Dan said, "You're nervous, Jim."

"Damn you!" said Ryan. "You were always too quick."

"Vidor didn't know you," said Dan. "How come?"

"Vidor never seen me," said Ryan. "I was hired by Coe. You oughta known that."

"Joe Coe didn't talk before he died," said Dan.

"What the hell you doin' with Vidor?" demanded Ryan. "He killed your brother. I was there. I seen it. Mike was in the doorway. Vidor shot him."

"And took his land," nodded Dan. "Mike always wanted to be a farmer; swore the nesters were right. It's been five years, now, hasn't it, Jim? Five long years."

Ryan didn't answer.

Dan went on: "I was up north at the time. I've been coastin' around some since then. Coe is dead, and Williams, and Carey. . . ."

"You killed 'em!" said Ryan hopelessly.

"They drew first, when they heard my name," said Dan.

Ryan said, "You're too smart. Give me an even break, face to face, and I'll meet you."

"Did Mike get an even shake?" asked Dan softly.

Ryan was silent again. Moments ticked off and sweat ran down the dark man's face. Dan said, "You managed to keep out of the way a long time. I hear you didn't fire any shots that night, Jim. I'm not going to murder you."

Ryan said, "Sooner or later. . . ."

"Mebbe," nodded Dan. "Meantime, what are Ty Crexall's plans for Vidor?"

Another silence. Then Ryan said, "You want to get in with Ty. I could fix it."

Dan said, "Do I work that way?"

"No," said Ryan. He sat back, breathing deep at his release from sudden death. "Damned if I get you, Dan. You ain't like Mike. All I know is Ty figures to break Vidor and get the gal. He's sweet on her. Before that trail herd hits Dodge, Ty has some plans. I dunno what they are. We're goin' up the Chisholm, and that's straight."

Dan said, "Vidor's really got you outgunned?"

"Twice," said Ryan positively. "Ty is smart, though. He's got some plan. That's all I know."

"Does he know my name?" demanded Dan.

"No," said Ryan. "He knew Mike good. But Mike was on Vidor's range. . . . I never told him, Dan. I'm leery. You kill too easy, Dan. You kill quicker'n any of us. . . ."

Dan said, "Yeah. And I got some killin 'to do. You might get out with a whole hide—if you use your skull. I'll expect to see you in Dodge—and by then you should know things."

Ryan said, "Like that, huh?"

"Like that. Or I come after you again," nodded Dan.

Ryan sighed. "I ain't no hero. I'll nose around."

"Okay," said Dan. "Run along and begin right now."

He handed over the guns. Ryan held them, one in each hand. Dan's hands were in his belt, the thumbs hooked, and Dan was leaning against the wall. Ryan said, "I'll bet you never emptied 'em, neither."

"Go ahead, Jim, take a shot," invited Dan.

"No," said Ryan vehemently. "No. I'd ruther not. I'd ruther see you in Dodge, Dan."

"Okay," said Dan. "And — Vidor's herd'll get through. Don't worry about that. I want that herd through!"

"You want that herd!" said Ryan shrewdly. "You and Ty and Vidor all want it! Some rangdoodle, Dan!" He wagged his head and walked out of the alley.

CHAPTER TWO

"Shoot First, Talk Later!"

THEY were almost five hundred miles up the Trail, and the Colorado was just ahead. Grass and water had been good, nothing had happened untoward and the Bar V steers were fattening even while they walked. It was May, and the weather had held up fine. They were close to the hills now, but there was nothing to be trepidatious about. Obie Ferris could not believe it.

The narrow-eyed foreman talked to Dan because he was skittery, not because he liked Dan. By maintaining silence, Dan was able to lead him on and gain much information.

Obie said, "Vidor is a fine man. He deals honest. Ty Crexall was always a rascal. I come to work for the Bar V right after they got to slinging lead at each other, an' I allus found Vidor right."

The night guard was already sleeping. The fire died too low and Dan threw a chip on it for a bit of light. Watching Obie's face, he said casually, "That was after Mike Trannick got his, I guess."

Obie said, "Yeah. I never knew Trannick. He was a good man, for a nester. Joe Coe and a passel of men hadda leave the country on account of that mess-up. That's when I come in,"

"Crexall and Monty tangled right after that?" asked Dan sharply.

"On account of it, I believe," said Obie thougthfully. He was intelligent; a cowhand elevated to foremen and trail boss, Dan thought. "Seems they had some words over Trannick. Least I thought so —but that ain't none of my business. Where you suppose they're gonna hit us, Dan? We ain't had even a suggestion o' trouble. I'm worried."

Dan said, "Tomorrow we come to the Colorado. I hear there are some fellows around these parts. If trail-cutters show up, get the gun-slingers around you when you talk."

He went over to his blankets and rolled himself up. He wanted to think. Obie's

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words had started something inside his head. It went around and around as he lay there sleepless, his head on his saddle.

He was fairly certain that Crexall would make his bid tomorrow. He knew of the men who worked the herds of the trail, claiming every steer they could get away with, bulldozing hesitant and cautious drovers with superior armament and manpower, and he knew that Ryan had been in this country for awhile. He also knew that Ty Crexall had spent some time among these semi-outlaws. Dan had passed this way coming south, after shooting Joe Coe in Ogallala.

It had been a long trail. When he heard of his elder brother's death, Dan had not rushed to vengeance against odds. Dan had always been footloose, but he was born with brains and a habit of careful thought.

Mike had been steady and not too bright; a kindly man, a born bachelor, handy around a ranch. Mike had settled in Texas, but Dan was headed for California, to see if any gold was left in the mountains. When the news got to him, Mike had been dead nearly a year.

It had taken most of his savings in the gold fields to get into the position he now occupied. But he was solid, he knew. There was a big sum in the bank at Dodge. In four years he had made his credit solid in certain places. He had learned the Montana cattle angles while he was hunting down Joe Coe and the others. He was in a position to strike now, and right at the heart of things.

He knew better than to gun down Monty Vidor. It was one thing to kill cowpunchers, quite another to go after a big man like Vidor. Complications ensued —even now there was the added entry of Ty Crexall, who was also out to get Monty Vidor.

Dan did not like Ty Crexall. The wiry man was too confident, too much the slimy politician. His work was underhand, from start to finish. He appeared a fine fellow, and the cattlemen got along well with him. He was wangling a big deal with his Eastern connections, playing for terrific stakes, Dan knew.

It occurred to Dan as he fell asleep that he knew too much. It also came to him—as it had an annoying habit of doing, since El Paso—that his last thought at night was always of the fair-haired sister of Monty Vidor. This was not good. It was enough to compete with a ruthless and tough-handed cowman like Ty Crexall over Vidor's cattle!

He awoke early in the morning and observed that Obie had already gone ahead to survey the river crossing. Obie was a good trailman, all right. Feliz and Creaky were oiling their guns and breakfast was sizzling. The other riders were sorting out their mounts from the remuda. Dan threw his saddle on Nightshade before he ate.

Feliz said, "You in beeg hurry, señor!"

Dan downed his coffee and arose. "You stay close to Obie. And don't draw unless you have to, either of you!"

Creaky Lang said, "You givin' the orders today?"

"Mebbeso," said Dan. "You don't like it?"

"When I don't," said the elderly gunman. "I'll right soon orate—to you!"

"That'll be time enough!" promised Dan. He forked the black horse and rode westward. The cattle were up and grazing. It would be an hour before the herd was under way. Dan rode over the hill to the west and took out a pair of glasses. He adjusted them and took up vigil in the shade of a tree.

The herd got going towards the river. Obie had returned and was riding the point, with Creaky and Feliz behind him at swing. Figures appeared within the range of Dan's glasses, riding hard. He counted six, then he counted a dozen more. The latter group stopped and the six rode on to head off the Bar V trail herd.

Dan waited, watching the dispersal of the dozen who remained behind. He saw them fan out and take posts at strategic points, out of sight of the trail. He shook his head—twelve were a lot of men. If there were any more of them to eastward, they'd have an army against them.

If he had been certain of Crexall's intent, it would have been simpler. He could arrange a hot reception, use his prescience to advantage, and scare off the gang, he was sure, but Crexall couldn't arrange for the stealing or vanishing of over two thousand head of Bar V cattle, stretching a

mile along the trail. What was the plan? Dan wondered.

It came to him that it must be the elimination of manpower. With the herd scattered and delayed, Ty would have a chance to get in his hard blows at Vidor. If some of Vidor's men were killed, so much the better. This, then, was a delaying movement.

Dan mounted and rode down the hill. The six men were in conference with Obie. The herd was thrown off the trail, and the Bar V men were holding it there. Dan rode in among the grazing cattle, making himself inconspicuous, but getting within earshot.

He heard the leader of the six strangers say, "We got a right to cut the herd for local cattle. We claim all Runnin' W and Sash V. You cut 'em, or we will. That's final."

Obie said mildly, "Okay. You cut 'em. I'll give you an hour."

"You'll give me all day if you won't help," snapped the leader, a burly man with a black beard. His companions were renegades on sight, Dan figured.

"You got no credentials," said Obie. Feliz and Creaky had spread out a little and were ready. "You'll get one hour."

The burly man said, "We'll see about that." He wheeled his horse and the others started behind him. They rode westward, so Dan figured there couldn't be any of the trail pirates to the east.

Dan whistled, and the Bar V riders came out from among the cattle. Creaky and Feliz and Obie had their guns drawn. Dan said to the big man. "No gunfire. Just ride along. We're takin' this herd over the river."

"Why, you damn' highbinders, I got a right to cut this herd!" bellowed the big man.

"Not so loud," cautioned Dan. "If that other dozen you got over the hill come, there'll be lead flyin'—your way!"

The cattle were thrown back and started for the river. The big man was frantic, but he had made a mistake in coming in and putting himself in danger. He dared not draw, and if the men came in behind him, he was a goner and he knew it. The riders urged the lead steers on. The long-legged Southern cattle broke into a lumbering trot—they were full of vinegar, anyway, from the easy, pleasant trip down.

They hit the ford, and the river was swift but passable. The cattle swam like fish, and back on the hilltop a band of men stood and watched, helpless. Dan held his gun ready, standing lone watch over the sextette as the other riders worked on the herd. Dan said, "Just want the river at our backs—in case of a stampede, you know. . . . And how was Ryan when you saw him last?"

The burly man blinked. "Dunno any Ryan. Yo're sure headin' fer boothill, mister."

"If any of Crexall's men are with you, just tell them Dan Smith held you up," grinned Dan. "I'll see Ty in Dodge. I may see you in Dodge, too, stranger."

The burly man said, "I got my holdin's right here. I'll law you over this, Mister Dan Smith."

"You and the whole seventeen?" laughed Dan. "Ride away, little ones. And when you come again, come shootin'!"

They turned and went back, and the cursing among them was artistic and audible. The drag was over the river and Dan followed, serious now.

He saw Obie hurrying to meet him and called, "Make it fast! Get this river well at our backs. This ain't finished."

Obie said, "That was Blackie Rover and his outfit."

"With Crexall's money in their pockets," nodded Dan. "I'm standing a watch, myself, tonight. Throw all the men out wide, watch and watch. And if you see a strange rider, shoot first and ask questions later!"

"You got some good idees, at that, Dan," nodded Obie. "I know trouble's a-comin'!"

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Errand in Dodge

IT WAS midnight, and Dan was sleepy, but he had no idea of shutting his eyes that night. He wanted this herd brought through to Dodge. He had gone to El Paso just to see that these cattle did get through to Dodge. He did not want Ty Crexall to break it up or slow it down. There were people in Dodge that

Dan wanted to see while Monty Vidor was present—and the herd must be in good condition and intact.

There was no sign of Blackie Rover or his men. These nuisances of the trail were keeping mighty low now, but somewhere they were lurking, Dan was dead sure. He rode back along the trail for a mile, keeping east of the bed ground.

He heard the noise, coming from two directions, and it was louder than a mess of tin cans tied together on a dog's tail. There was a horrifying shriek, then, and he caught a glimpse of a rider. He drew out his carbine and fired.

The shriek increased, then died to a groan as the man threw out his arms against the night sky and tumbled from his pony. Dan turned and rode westward, his rifle ready. He saw the big figure of Black Bill Rover, saw other men rising. He fired again and again.

But the noise went on. Riderless horses drummed the prairie, frightened by the noise-makers attached to them in pannier-fashion. Dan cursed; he had heard dried rawhide rattleboxes before. Cattle responded to them beautifully—in one way. They ran.

Northward there would be others, so that the cattle stampeded westward, Dan knew. He was not amazed that Blackie's forces did not attack, that the return fire was scattered and inaccurate. They would be waiting to run the cattle along the river, far off the trail. Getting the river at their backs by flouting the fake herd cutters had been a good strategic move, but determined riders could run the cattle into the hills and get them hopelessly separated. Blackie's men could steal the herd blind during this operation.

Dan rode hard, untying his slicker. He waved at the racing cattle. He fired his gun in their faces, trying to turn them. Two of the Bar V riders came tearing and rode with him, thrusting their sturdy little cow ponies into the mass of heaving cattle.

Dan drew off. Nightshade was a long-barreled runner, not a close-coupled cow horse. And there were the wildly racing, gourd-carrying horses which had started the stampede, running together now, making back for the home range. Dan streaked after them.

A rifle shot could not be heard over the thunder of hoofs and the cracking of pistol fire. But something whistled past Dan's ears as he bent over Nightshade's neck and the horse increased his stride. Dan peered into the night for a possibl assailant. The clouds parted and the moon came through, and a wiry man on a fast horse was spurring across the river.

Dan threw up his gun, but Nightshade shied at a shadow. The moon ducked behind the clouds again and Dan held his fire. He sat quite still, then, soothing the trembling horse.

He needed no further proof that Ty Crexall was behind the Blackie Rover mob. He had—he was positive—just seen the cattle king himself; had almost been killed by a bullet from Ty Crexall's gun. He rode over and had a look at the spot from which he imagined the gun had been fired. In the soft earth, close by the river, was the plain imprint of a man's boot and knee. Dan bent close, lighting a match.

He plucked at the mud and came up holding a piece of glass between his fingers. He stared at it, muttering, "He even wore his diamond on the kill!" He put Ty Crexall's stone inside his oilskin packet, where a picture of his brother Mike and the news clippings of the deaths of several gentry were stored.

He rode Nightshade back to the remuda and swapped for one of Obie's ponies. He went back and began working the herd over to the north. Obie rode up and called, "We got 'em headed and millin'. The river helped stop 'em. Nary one made the hills!"

"How many dead men?" asked Dan.

"We found Blackie Rover and two others," said Obie. He added somberly. "You shoot good in the dark, Dan. Awful good!"

Creaky came in, his horse lathered. He said, "Too damn' good."

Obie said, "Shut up, Creaky! The boss put him on this job and the boss knows what he's doin'!"

Feliz was grinning close behind Creaky. The two changed mounts and went back to work. Obie said, "I don't care who you are, Dan Smith, or what your game is, so long as it's agin' Ty Crexall and fer Monty Vidor. If any of these rannies try it on you, call on me."

Dan said drily, "Thanks, Obie. Thanks."

Obie started away, turned back sharply, and called, "Don't you go under-ratin' a man that minds his own bizness, Dan! I'll be there when the lead flies!"

Dan saw that the herd was under control and rode back to camp for a cup of java. He was under no illusions about Obie Ferris. He had met these loyal men before. Obie would die for Monty Vidor—but he would be more likely to live and strike shrewd blows at Monty's enemies. Obie was a great asset to Vidor.

Strong watches stayed with the herd all night, singing to them, quieting them. At daylight, crews went combing the countryside for strays, but found only a score or so. The stampede had been swiftly begun, but alertness had held it down to the minimum of trouble and to no losses at all. Several of the men grunted their approval at Dan during that day and the relationship between him and the Bar V men improved.

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THEY rode northward, ever north . . . and they made good time, and there were no sore feet among the cattle. It was as swift and safe a drive as ever was made up the Western Trail. Dan felt himself growing fat and serene as the days passed by, each much like the last. He was not under the stress of the working cow hands, and time began to hang a little heavy.

Dan was thinking a lot about Mike, who had sort of raised Dan. Their father had died fighting under Jeb Stuart, a horseman to the end. Their mother hadn't survived the Reconstruction beginnings by many days. So it had been up to good-natured, brawny, penniless Mike. He had managed, somehow. When Dan was big enough, they had worked the Texas ranches together, but always Mike had wanted to settle down on a little place and raise things. He had the growing hand, Mike; a green thumb, they called it. Other punchers always laughed at that.

When they'd made a stake with that little herd they had put together, Dan had taken just enough to get away after gold. Mike had used the rest to stock the little ranch, which had not seemed to occupy important grazing land on the fancied range of Monty Vidor's Bar V. Dan still did not understand fully why Vidor had attacked a peaceful citizen like Mike Trannick.

Well . . . maybe he would never know. But of this he was mortal certain: Mike had been murdered in the doorway of his cabin, unarmed. Vidor's gang was there, Vidor was responsible. Each one was to pay for this crime.

Margot, of course, had not been there. Margot had been East at school. Monty had given his kid sister the best of everything; you had to hand him that. Margot was very sweet and beautiful. . . .

Dan shook himself from dreams and began to work the herd. The days went by and the bend of the Mulberry was magically in sight. One morning Dan sat Nightshade and watched the trains go by. They were ten miles south of Dodge City, and now it was Obie who was in full command.

Dan sat and stared at the smoke of the train and marveled at himself. Here he stood, on the threshold of a success which had been four hard years in the making. He had risked his life a dozen times a year. He had exchanged lead with outlaws and ridden a dozen horses to death. Yet his heart beat faster, only because in Dodge City he would see Margot Vidor!

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THEY threw the herd off the road and set the guard. Obie and Dan took a quick ride, but there was no sign of Ty Crexall's cattle, nor of his men. They had probably camped to the west, and there was no doubt that Crexall was already in Dodge. But, Dan thought, Monty Vidor had arrived first, for Crexall had taken time to make his bid to scatter the herd at the Colorado. Ty must be awful sure of himself, thought Dan, to let Monty go in ahead of him and make a deal.

He said to Obie, "I'm going in to Dodge. What's your idea?"

Obie scratched his thick beard. "Reckon I oughta stick with the herd till I hear from the boss."

"The boys'll be too anxious to see the elephant," said Dan.

"They're gettin' high wages to watch longhorns," said Obie grimly. "My stayin'll hold 'em. They don't figure you one of the outfit, somehow."

Dan said evenly, "Specially Creaky and Feliz?"

"They're killers, too," said Obie.

"Too," thought Dan. Then he said, shortly, "That's right." He caught up Nightshade and rode towards Dodge. He was frowning, and his usually steady mind was perturbed.

He had become, then, a killer. The mark was on him, so that men like Creaky and Obie recognized it. He had killed Joe Coe and Williams and Carey—but Creaky and Obie didn't know that. They knew about the brothers who had attacked Vidor, and about Blackie and his men, all men who had needed killing.

It wasn't *whom* he had killed, then. It was the *way* that he did it. He was too calm, too inured to the sight of men dead at his own hands. In these four years he had lost something. He had changed, become another man, altogether. That was sure.

He was going now deliberately to ruin Monty Vidor. If either Monty or Ty Crexall crossed him, he would force them to draw before witnesses, and then he would kill them, too. He was going to use Ryan—Vidor's man—to gain information. Yet he castigated Crexall for underhandedness!

Then there was Creaky and Feliz, who did not like him. And Obie Ferris, who would be loyal to Vidor, unto death or ruin.

How many prospective killings did that make?

He looked curiously at his right hand. With it he had drawn the long-barreled, heavy Colt .44 and shot down living, breathing men like himself. He had shot them, just as they had shot Mike. It was the only thing he knew to do.

Well, he had put four years into it. He had succeeded in all that he had begun. He was near the end of the trail now, and there was no turning back. . . .

He rode into Dodge with his chin hard and his eyes gleaming.

If El Paso had been hectic, Dodge was all its color and violence multiplied a thousand times. The line of cool cottonwoods was green with midsummer lushness. On the South Side, the cattle buyers, cowboys, tinhorns and Indians, all went back and forth in a kaleidoscope of motion, noise and bright color. Dan rode to the stable of the Bright House and left Nightshade and the first man he saw on the main drag was Bat Masterson.

The famed marshal said, "Howdy Dan? Back in one piece, eh? Leave that handy hog-leg somewheres, before you go killing someone."

Dan said, "I'm not on the prod, Bat."

The marshal grinned. "I know, I know. People push you in corners. Man named Vidor has been lookin' for you."

Dan said, "I'm working for him."

"Ty Crexall's in, too," said Bat. He shifted his belt so that the .45 slanted to his hand. "Looks like a big deal."

Dan said, "Is Manville here?"

"Yeah," said Bat. "More millin' around than a stampede on a stormy night. I wouldn't want any trouble, Dan."

Dan nodded and went over to the hotel. He had, he was perfectly aware, been warned by the nerviest marshal in the West. Dodge was wide open, but the city council wanted fewer killings. The Eastern papers were riding the town too hard, since the buyers had taken to commuting on the railroad and had carried blood-curdling stories back East.

He left his gun at the desk and turned to see Monty Vidor coming towards him.

For a moment he was shocked at the appearance of the man. Monty's cheeks were pale, his silken mustache actually drooped. He shook hands like a wet fish and dragged Dan into the bar.

They drank, and Vidor said in a hoarse whisper, "Crexall's blocked me, Dan. He got to my market, and somehow Manville won't buy from me. Manville is committed to another man, he says. It's Crexall, of course."

"Manville's your Eastern independent buyer?" asked Dan.

"Ace in the hole," said Vidor bitterly. "I wanted him to back me on the Big B deal, take my cattle for delivery next year and thus save my credit standing. He had virtually promised. Now the deal's off."

Dan said, "Too bad."

"I can't swing the ranch," said Vidor. He took another drink too quickly.

"Someone will bid me out of it. There's someone cutting my feet out from under me. How Crexall could have known. . . ."

Dan said, "It means ruin, then?"

Vidor said, "Absolute ruin. I'm involved over my head."

Dan took a deep breath. He said, "Wait here, in the hotel. I'll see some people. . . . I hope Miss Margot made the trip all right?"

"She's in her room. She doesn't want to see anyone," said Vidor dully. "Ty—he stares at her."

He took another drink and the sweat stood on the backs of his well-kept hands. "I've never killed a man. But. . . ."

"You never killed a man?" echoed Dan. "Is that certain, Monty?"

"Never had the occasion," muttered Vidor. "You saved me the trouble, perhaps. I'm a good shot and fairly quick. They say Ty's poison with a gun. . . ."

Dan said, "Leave your gun with Bright, where it belongs. I'll see you later."

He went out into Dodge City, his thoughts whirling again. He felt a bit naked without his belt and gun, but he walked south and passed the variety theatres, the Roundhouse, the Golconda. He recognized a horse tethered outside the Ace-Deuce, and pushed open the batwing doors.

HE STOOD for a moment at the end of the bar. Ryan was piking at monte against a Mexican dealer. There was no sign of Ty Crexall. Bat Masterson stuck his head in, shook it at Dan, smiled and went on.

Ryan glanced around, saw Dan and blinked. After a moment he strolled out through the back. Dan finished his drink and followed.

Back of the saloon was a littered vacant lot and a rickety fence, behind which they squatted on their heels. Ryan said, "I been expectin' you. I'm plumb glad you jumped me and made me get wise to some things. I've swung a wide loop in my day, and mebbe I've done some other things. But this Crexall is bad."

"Yeah," said Dan.

"He's got Chink and the others bought up high," said Ryan. "They'll follow

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him to hell-and-gone. And he's plannin' to waylay your herd twenty miles or so up beyond Duck Creek, and he's got some devil's plan beyond that. To do with Miss Vidor."

"What's that?" snapped Dan.

"Seems like he can't do nothin' with the buyer he had lined up," said Ryan. "Manville, is the name. . . ."

"I know all that," said Dan impatiently. "What about the girl?"

"He alla time keeps mentionin' her to Chink. They laugh and keep that part to themselves. I reckon he means to grab her."

"Grab her?" echoed Dan.

"Thinks he can hornswoggle Vidor, if he gets the gal," shrugged Ryan. "I told you he's sweet on her. It ain't a nice deal, way I look at it. . . ."

Dan said, "You better duck the outfit, Ryan. You want to stay alive. You won't if you stick with Crexall. Thanks for tellin' me all this, and I'll see you when it's over."

Ryan said, "Wait! Crexall left the drag and disappeared for some days. When he come back he didn't have that diamond. Mebbe he's hard up, too!"

"You don't like him, do you?" asked Dan reflectively.

"No way he comes," said Ryan sturdily.

Dan, on the verge of leaving, stopped and leaned against the fence. He said, "Tell me about the night my brother got killed, Ryan. Try to remember every little thing. From start to finish."

He listened for half an hour as Ryan struggled with his memory. Mike and Vidor were supposed to have had a controversy about fences, which had been cut. Joe Coe and the outfit rode over that way after a stray bunch, and stopped when they saw Vidor's horse. There was a light in the cabin. Vidor had come out, then turned to say something. Mike stood framed in the doorway. The shot sounded and Mike went down.

Joe Coe and the others pitched in, but Ryan's green horse had bucked him almost off, he said, and he hadn't got into it at all. He only knew that they said Mike fired from the ground, several times, but only pinked Carey.

"I saw the mark on Carey, after he was dead," said Dan. "So Vidor killed Mike, eh?"

"He musta!" said Ryan. "Wasn't one of our outfit had a gun in his hand until that first shot was fired."

Dan said, "Had Ty and Monty crossed each other then? Think hard, now! In any way?"

"Not that I know about," said Ryan slowly, shaking his head, "Their range never crossed any place. Of course they was both gettin' awful big about then, an' you know what usually happens. . . ."

Dan said, "Okay, Ryan. Stay out of trouble."

He went to the alley and started for the street. He was almost out of the alleyway when he heard the shot. His name echoed on the air—his right name, Dan Trannick. It was Ryan's voice.

He turned and whirled back. He saw a wisp of smoke and dashed across the littered yard. He stepped into a hole and went down on his hands and knees, cursing, among the tin cans. When he arose there was no one in sight.

He leaped the fence and Ryan was lying on the ground, one hand at the place where his gun would have been. Ryan looked up and his eyelids fluttered. He said, "No dice, Dan. I never even saw him."

Dan said, "Help's coming. Hold tight!"

"The son didn't miss," said Ryan through clenched teeth.

He was hit in the back, under the left shoulder blade, Dan saw. There was no chance. Ryan gulped and breathed, "Boothill for me. . . . Get him, Dan like—you got the others. . . . Damn' them! Mike—was . . . good man. . . ."

When Bat Masterson arrived, Dan said sardonically, "You took his gun, but someone else packs a weapon. I'm getting mine back pronto Bat."

The marshal shook his head solemnly. "I don't like it, either, Dan. But don't get your gun. Crexall's gang will be hot; a war could start. Better get out of town, Dan."

"You fixin' any part of this on me?" Dan's eyes narrowed and his jaw set.

"No," said Bat frankly. "But after you see Manville, I'd admire for you to go. You're bad medicine, Dan. Killin's seem to sort of follow you around, like h'ants!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Texas Feuds Hit Kansas!

THE buyer named Manville was a hearty, stout fellow with the easy air of a moneyed person.

He smoked a big cigar and said, "I don't get you, Trannick. You've got Vidor tied in a knot. You had your money up and I made the deal. The Bar B is yours. All you need to do is buy his cattle—which no one else can do, thanks to you and Crexall. You can buy it for nothing, squeeze him into a deal for what stock he has left in Texas—and he won't have enough of your money to get himself out of debt. He's as good as broke. But Vidor is a pretty nice fella. I can't understand why an honest guy like you wants to do him in the eye!"

Dan said, "Private reasons."

Manville shrugged. "I'm a business man. Your money is posted, like I said. Maybe it's none of my business, but I should think you'd be fighting Crexall. He's fixing to ruin your cattle business."

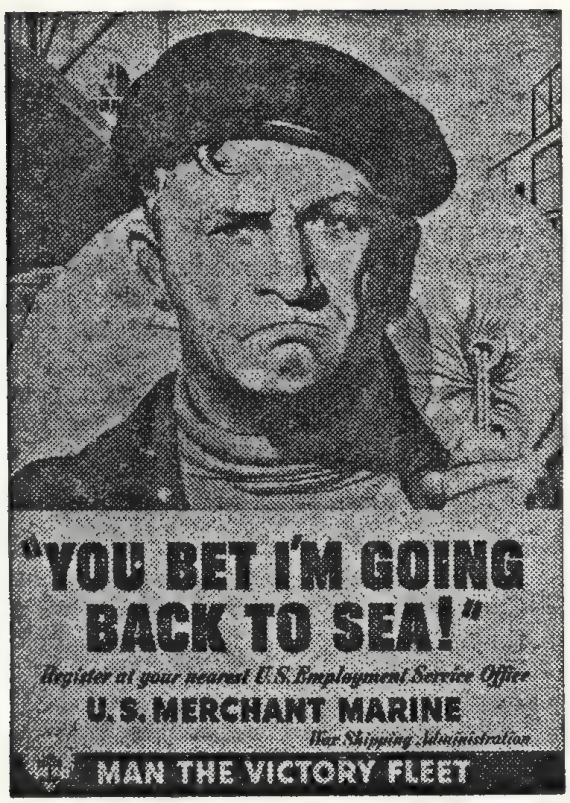
Dan arose. They were in a private room at a Texas street saloon. Monty and Margot were staying at a hotel nearby. He said, "I just wanted to pass you the check. The deal is made, then?"

"When you get the stock for the Bar B, it's made. You'll be a rich man in a year," nodded Manville. "My people will back you to the limit, and the way beef prices are booming, you can afford to let your herd fatten on Montana grass."

Dan said, "That's all I want to know." He finished his drink and paid for it.

He went out, leaving Manville to shake his head over these crazy Texas cowmen.

Night had fallen, and Dodge was roaring. Dan walked along, nodding to Hongkong Price and Chesty Laurel and other cattlemen of note. Next year he could be one of them, smoking big cigars and talking big money. He had built well. He had been on the ground while Vidor and Crexall were busy in the south. His preknowledge of the situation had placed Vidor in his hands—that, and the cash he had gathered and saved and gambled with. He had only to see Monty and buy the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cattle at his own figure and winter them on the Big B.

He started past the Ace-Deuce when the doors swung wide to admit a pair of roistering cow-hands. Dan glanced within, and stopped dead.

Creaky Lang and Feliz Montero were against the bar, glasses at their elbows. That was strange, for Obie had meant to hold them all on watch until Monty gave the word.

Dan waited until someone at the crowded bar moved, giving him a clear view of the man who was talking earnestly to Creaky and Feliz. It was Chink Devlin, foreman for Ty Crexall.

Dan stood still for a long moment, watching the three, making sure they were on good terms.

Then his stride was swift, going to the Bright House. He swung to the desk and said, "Mr. Vidor?"

"Yeah," said the clerk. "He left a note for you."

"He's gone?" asked Dan, tearing open the envelope.

"Yup," said the clerk. "Gone as hell, bag and baggage. Sister's leavin' on the train in the mornin'. Reckon Vidor ran smack into the Combine."

Dan was reading the shaky handwriting, fingering the crisp paper of a check drawn to his name for two hundred and seventy dollars, and reading the note with it:

Dear Dan:

This will pay you for the three months and more which you worked. I also paid off the other extra hands. It's no use, Dan, there'll be no job on the Big B, and I feel like a skunk to have brought you this far. I'm throwing the herd over the Mulberry and getting as far north as we can with our slim crew—the loyal ones like Ferris.

We'll just drift, hoping to find someone who will let us winter, and maybe in the spring. . . . Hell, you and I both know there isn't much chance. If I could kill Crexall—but I can't. It's not in me to deliberately kill a man, I guess.

I'm sending Margot south, with what cash I have left. Please see her, as she thinks a lot of you. I'm terribly sorry about it all, but for now I'm defeated.

Monty

So he had paid off Creaky and Feliz and the other hired guns! And had started a crazy, aimless drift with the cattle. . . . And Margot was upstairs. Dan went out into the street and back to the Ace-Deuce. Creaky, Feliz and Devlin were gone.

He searched the town, and found a few of Vidor's other gunmen, but they were all sodden with drink. And he did not find one of Ty Crexall's men. Nor did he see Ty himself.

He went back to the hotel, ascertained Margot's room number, and climbed the stairs. He rapped on the door, and it swung open under his knuckles.

He stepped across the threshold, calling "Margot! Are you there?"

The door slammed behind him and a voice said, "She's here, pardner, but not for long!"

He wheeled to face guns. One was held by Feliz Montero. Two were held by Creaky Lang. In a corner, tied to a chair, hand and foot was Margot Vidor, a gag across her mouth.

Dan raised his hands and sought the wall with his shoulder. He said, "So you sold out to Ty, eh, boys?"

They were both a little drunk, he saw.

Creaky Lang said, "I was hopin' to see you, Smith. Where's that fancy gun? Bat take it away from ye?"

Dan laughed easily, "Why should I need a gun?"

"I never liked you, Smith," said Creaky Lang. "This is as good a time as any to work you over."

Dan said, "People wouldn't like you botherin' the gal. I wouldn't shoot, if I were you. Makes a noise."

But Feliz was already holstering his gun. In his hand was a murderous looking knife. Creaky motioned to it and said:

"The gal's goin' fer a leetle pasear. You're stayin' here, right in her room. But you won't look pretty when Bat finds you."

Dan said, "This is funny—men from my own outfit!" He was stalling desperately. He knew all about the guns in Creaky Lang's hands. He had seen oldtimers like Lang go into action before. They were sure shots and cool as cucumbers. "What you got against me?"

"I never liked your face," growled Creaky. "The sweetest order I ever got was to beef you."

Dan said, "So you're taking orders

from Ty now? He seems plumb anxious to get me out of the way."

Creaky said, "Get him, Feliz, we ain't got time to palaver. And make it a nice carvin' job, Feliz. He's a cheap gun!"

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FELIZ was smiling. His skin was very oily and his opaque eyes were exactly like those of a cougar stalking. He held the knife like a sword, sliding in. He came lightly, shifting a little, knowing Dan would make some kind of play.

Margot choked a warning past the gag, her eyes distended with fear. It occurred to Dan in a flash that Crexall would not have gone this far had he known Vidor was in the bag to Dan—or to anyone else. In a way, this was Dan's fault. . . .

Creaky's guns would get him, of course, but Bat or his brother or another officer would be along, Dan knew. It would save Margot, at least, if he made Creaky pull a trigger.

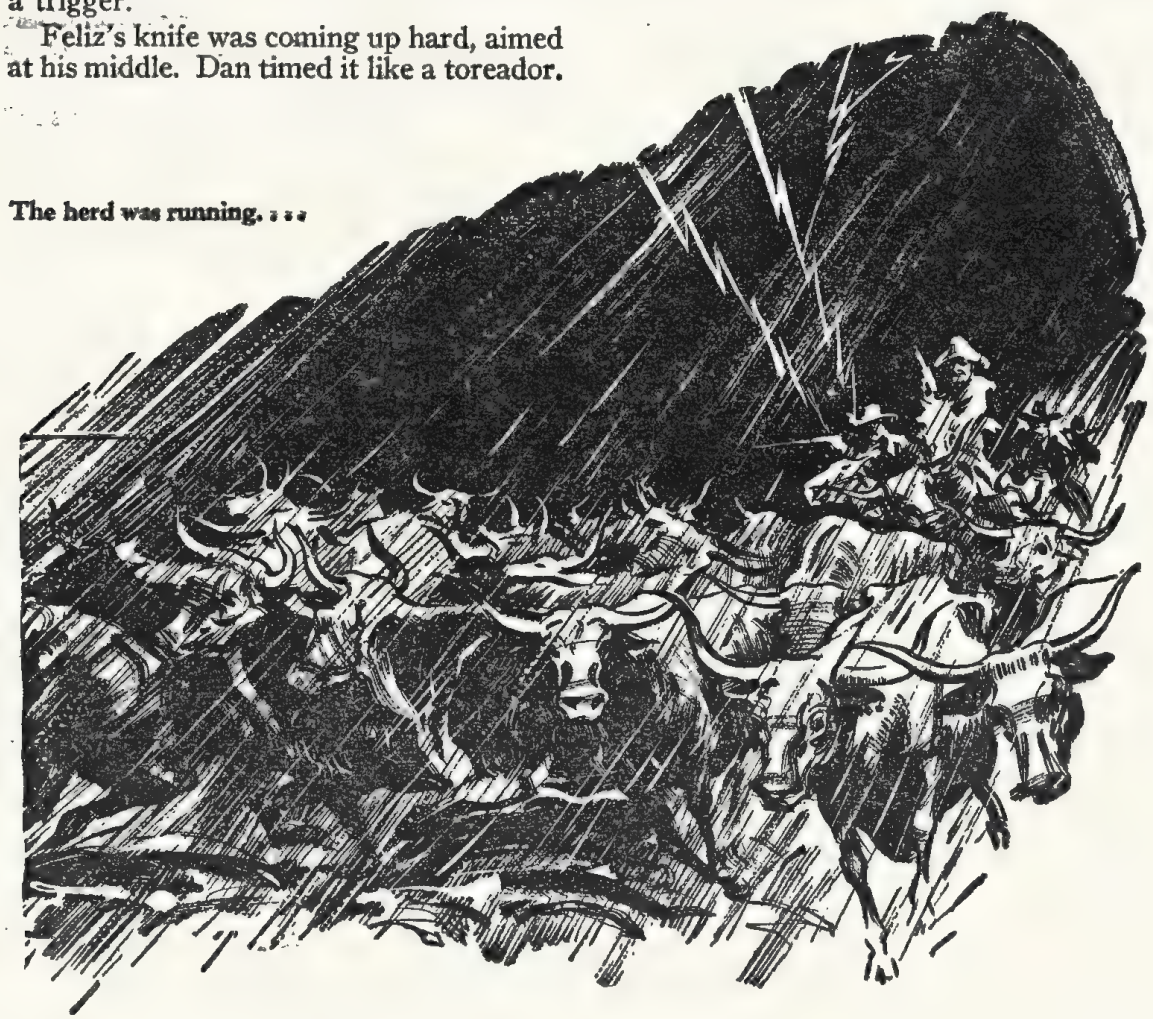
Feliz's knife was coming up hard, aimed at his middle. Dan timed it like a toreador. Then his slim hips swayed, his body moved aside, but his feet remained stationary. Feliz's rush carried him close.

Dan's steely arms went around the middle of the smaller man. He picked him up off his feet, and the knife slashed at Dan's back, ripping his jacket to shreds. He bounded forward, straight at the gun of Creaky Lang.

He heard the roar of the weapon, and it seemed as though bullets were hammering into him, but he never stopped going. The added weight of Feliz gave him driving power. When he struck against Creaky's arm, he threw Feliz away from him, and ducked low, like a boxer.

He swung back and came up. He was under Creaky's hammering gun. He pounded both fists into Creaky's stomach. The gunman gave backwards, seeking to deflect his fire.

Dan got hold on the right arm, crossed it over Creaky's left in one motion. At the same instant he brought up his knee. The gun clattered, falling on the floor. Dan's



The herd was running. . . .

fists struck again, like iron mauls. Creaky slumped, groaning, against the wall.

Dan shifted like a cougar, expecting Feliz to be recovered. But the Mexican lay where he had been flung. Those shots hammering at Dan had gone home—in the body of the knife-man he held in his arms.

Dan was cutting Margot loose from the last bond when Bat Masterson crashed into the room and stopped, staring at the carnage.

Margot gasped. "They came in and tied me up, and then they waited—for Dan. They had orders to kill him."

Dan said. "She had a tough shock, Bat. Get these damn' men out of here; Creaky's alive, I think."

Bat said, "That's what you think. You'd better take her out of here. Creaky's broke his neck, somehow."

"Well," said Dan, "you wouldn't let me have my gun!"

Margot was standing. The color had returned to her face. Her voice grew calm, she said, "This is my room. Have them taken out. I must change my clothing. They—they're after Monty—Crexall and his gang!"

Dan said, "I'll take care of that."

"No!" she cried. "Not alone. I'm going, I tell you! Monty'll be hurt, and I must be there. He—he needs me now. I should never have let him go!"

Men were crowding in, carrying out the bodies. Bat Masterson said, "I'd have given a farm to see it—and you without a hogleg to your name!"

"That's all finished," Dan said. "But Crexall is aiming to run off Vidor's cattle and kill Monty. Are you going with me?"

He took the guns from the fallen guards . . .

Bat shook his head. "I'm a town marshal, Dan. I got strict orders to keep hands off. You wanta see the sheriff."

Dan was in the hall and the door was closed. Inside, Margot dressed hurriedly. Dan said, "Ty's got his whole crew out. Vidor paid off his gunmen. It'll be plain murder!"

Bat Masterson put his hand on Dan's shoulder. He said frankly, "I know it, Dan. Personally, I'm with you and Vidor. But I've got orders, I tell you. Ty's got things pretty much his own way. It's politics. I'd go alone—but they'd have me in a week. It's a thing we can't afford to but into. This ain't Dodge City business. This is a Texas feud."

The Marshal was right, and Dan knew it. The door behind them opened and Margot stepped out. Bat said, "Whew!"

She was wearing a tight-fitting sweater and a pair of levis which were tucked into tiny, decorative boots. A small gun peeped from her belt and she held a .30—30 rifle in her strong hands. She said quietly, "Get horses, Dan, and we'll ride. It's at Duck Creek, or just beyond, they said."

Dan said, "Out of the way, Bat."

He led her down the stairs and reclaimed his gun from the gaping clerk. He went over to the stable and threw the saddle on a roan, asking no questions. Nightshade nickered, and in a moment both horses were ready. He led them into the yard and Margot was up and ready in an instant.

Dan mounted and Nightshade danced out into the street. The cottonwoods were like soldiers in a line pointing south as Dan and the girl clattered into the night.

CHAPTER FIVE

Killer in the Dark

DUCK CREEK was six miles north of Dodge City. Monty Vidor could have driven his herd beyond the Creek, by now, Dan knew. He glanced at Margot and saw that she had the carbine handy by her knee. She was riding astride and sat the horse like a cow-hand, deep in the saddle.

He said above the clatter of hoofs: "We ought to hear the excitement before we get to it. It'll give us an advantage."

"If only Monty's alive!" she said. "We can start over, at the beginning. We can plant the Texas ranch, turn nesters. A chance to fight is all I ask!"

Dan said, "Sure. I know how you feel. I had a brother once."

The horses forged on, and when they came to the Creek there was no sign of the herd. They forded at the crossing and a pink flash illuminated the sky and then the echo of gunfire came back to them.

"The circus is on," said Dan. "We'll circle and come in. Stay a pace or two behind me. And keep low!"

He spurred eastward, then cut a straight trail for the north. The herd was running; he could hear the thunder of hoofs. Crexall must be crazy to start a war so close to the bed-grounds of other herds!

Well, a man could be crazy with hatred, he thought. He ought to know!

He heard the gunfire on his right, now. He turned and came in on the flank, and Margot was steady behind him. The crackle of the shooting was louder. The lambent moon dappled the sage with shadows.

And the firing stopped. Dan's throat contracted for a moment and Margot cried, "They've got him! There were too many of them and they shot him!"

She was probably right as hell, Dan thought bitterly. But he said, "No tellin'. We'll go another half mile, and take a look."

He topped a rise and let the horses blow, staring westward to the spot whence the shots had come. There was slight noise, and some motion, then all was still again.

Dan said, "We'll go in on foot. It's quieter."

"We're too late," the girl mourned. "Crexall had the men, the time. What can we two do?"

"You could stay here with the horses," said Dan. Then he said, "There! The fire."

A campfire had leaped up. There were men bearing guns in plain sight, and Obie Ferris was standing, his hands bound, blood on his face, his beard jutting defiance.

They hadn't tied Monty Vidor. He was like a large, tawny lion at bay, crouching a little, staring down at the short figure of Ty Crexall. Monty was still defying them, still alive. Margot breathed, "Thank God! This is all I ask—that we bring him out alive!"

"The herd's gone," said Dan practically. "Prob'bly the remuda, too, unless Ty's boys rounded it up. I count four men, in sight. You see any more?"

She did not answer, and he turned quickly. She had the rifle butt to her cheek, and he knew the muzzle was supposed to be covering Ty Crexall.

He knocked up the gun, and she cried out, "It will scatter them! Monty might get away!"

"Range too far. No horses," said Dan laconically.

"I can hit him!" she said, "I know I can!"

Dan moved forward swiftly, without speaking, and Margot followed. He had spotted the horses of the marauders under care of Crexall's man, to the east of the campfire.

He knew what would happen if he missed a trick. Monty and Obie would be shot down at once, then Margot would be captured or killed. Of himself he thought little, in those moments. This had become a fight against Ty Crexall and all he represented.

He got within reach of the horses and crept among them. He left Margot crouching, irresolute, with her rifle. There were horses now, if he managed, and she was within range of Crexall, all right.

But he tapped her shoulder and said, "Hold your fire, darling!" and she stared at him and nodded.

So he was among the horses, coming from the rear, with the two guards in front of him, between him and the fire. He paused as a cayuse shied.

He heard Ty's voice, snarling, "You can't do a damned thing about it. I've got Margot and I'm goin' to keep her. Your herd's scattered and you'll be dead and she'll own them when I round them up for her. You crossed me just once, long ago, Monty. Now you're payin'."

"I never crossed you," said Monty steadily. "I spoke to Mike Trannick about his place. The man was doing a good job. Then he got shot down, under my very eyes."

Crexall said, "I'm not augurin' about Trannick, that fool! You told Margot to stay away from me!"

Monty drew himself up to full height. "But of course!"

★

DAN chuckled to himself at Crexall's curses. The two guards chose this moment to get their heads together to comment upon the scene between their boss and his enemy. Dan promptly moved forward.

He holstered his gun. He reached with two strong hands and got hold of an ear and a collar. He banged the two heads together, very hard.

He took the guns from the fallen guards, tucked one into his belt and held the other in his left hand. There would not be time to reload.

Crexall grated, "I may marry her and I may not, Monty. I'm goin' to give you a gun, right now. I'm goin' to give you a show. But I want you to know I'm goin' to get you, and then I'm going to have Margot!"

"Just give me the gun and don't run off at the head," said Monty. "You always talked too much, you know. That's how I found out about Trannick. And if his brother ever catches up with you, that will be another story, Ty! Give me the gun!"

Chink Devlin was standing nearby, with Lil Slaughter and Morgan. There was no sign of the other Crexall men, nor of Bar V survivors, but they must be around, Dan thought. He was not surprised that Ty was giving Monty a gun and a chance to shoot it out.

Ty was notoriously quick, and he wouldn't quite murder Monty in cold blood before witnesses. It was another instance to prove that no man was a complete snake, Dan thought, as he started forward.

He stopped, considering. Margot was holding the rifle, but he believed she would not fire. There were fifty yards of clear ground between him and the group at the fire. There was no cover whatsoever, and there were too many guns.

He doubled back a moment and changed hats with one of the fallen horse guards. It was a wide-brimmed, soft sombrero, fortunately, and he tipped it over his broken nose. He took the reins of several horses and began edging forward again.

Ty Crexall was setting his scene. He moved his men back with a wave of his hand. He had his gun tied down, Dan saw. He was saying, "Chink, you give him your left-hand gun when I tell you—and keep him covered so he don't use it before we're set. . . ."

"You needn't worry, Ty," said Monty. "I don't fire on men without warning."

Ty said, "Shut up! I'm givin' you a fair shake. That's more'n I should do."

Dan went on, and Chink threw him a glance, but evidently thought curiosity was bringing his men closer. If only Margot didn't shoot! He made a step, then an-

other. He wanted to be flanking Ty and the foreman and the two cowboys when the action started. He did not believe that Ty meant to give Monty an entirely even break. . . .

There was a shout behind him, and he stopped dead. The hand holding the reins also held a gun and it took a second to get it untangled. He heard a voice shout, "Here's the gal! We just got the gal!"

Devlin came running, expostulating, "Creaky and Feliz had the gal! I saw 'em go in!"

Ty Crexall shouted. "Bring her in! We've been double-crossed!"

Dan left the horses. Monty cried, "Margot, darling!"

Two men were holding her, but she still fought them. Dan crept past the fire, trying to make himself inconspicuous. He almost ran smack into Lil Slaugher. But every eye was on the struggling girl, and Ty Crexall was trying to talk to her.

Dan tapped Monty on the shoulder, thrust the gun forward. He said in a low voice, "This one's loaded. Cover them from the left and I'll take the right."

He drifted in among the milling group of men and got behind Margot's captors. He made a quick leap, then, coming in, chopping with the gun in his right hand. The muzzle struck behind the ear of one captor. He jerked around and hammered the other on the temple as Monty called, "Hands up, all of you! You're surrounded!"

He got Margot behind him. He held both guns at hip level, aiming one at Ty Crexall. He said, "Ty, I've been wantin' you in my sights for five years—and I didn't even know it!"

CHAPTER SIX

"One More Chance to Fight!"

FOR a moment no one moved at all. It was a desperate chance, and Dan knew it. The night contained more of Crexall's men who, at any moment might begin a fight which they must inevitably win. Obie Ferris was still bound and bloody by the fire. Monty was going over, crabwise, his gun steady, trying to get at Obie, but Monty probably didn't have a knife.

Dan said, "Herd together, there! Quick, or I'll ventilate you like I did Joe Coe—and Carey—and Williams!"

"Trannick!" choked Ty Crexall. "I seen the resemblance, in El Paso. You're Trannick!" He gathered himself together and said, "Don't you know Vidor killed your brother?"

"That's what I thought," nodded Dan. "That's what I was told. But you didn't kill Ryan soon enough, Ty. Ryan's story tipped me off that no one saw who killed Mike."

"It came from behind me!" said Monty. "Someone fired from ambush!"

"Joe Coe, or Ty himself," nodded Dan. "Ty bought out your men. No doubt about it. He wanted you out of the way, but he wanted Margot, too. So he framed Mike's killin' on you. Knowing somethin' about us Trannicks, he figured I'd come back."

Crexall said, "That's a damned lie!" His sharp eyes were darting here and there, looking for the men who purportedly surrounded them. He was cool, even now, Dan saw.

The thing to do was shoot him down. He was Mike's murderer—the cause of an impending cattle war, a menace to all decent men.

Dan said, "You've got your gun on you, Ty. Draw!"

Ty howled suddenly, "Chink! Lil!"

But it was Beany Morgan, a little to the side, who opened the ball. Dan jumped backwards to try and block Margot out of the play and knock her flat. And when she was not there, he stumbled and missed his first shot. Someone was plunging for the fire, to kick it apart.

Dan stayed on one knee, snapping his right hand gun, holding the other ready. They were burning powder all around him and the horses were running now. He saw Margot for a moment as a burning brand flew in the air. She was hacking with a small knife at Obie Ferris's bonds. The rawhide reata was tough, but Margot did not stop, though bullets must have hissed around her.

Dan shot Beany Morgan, then shifted position as a bullet seared his arm. He saw Monty, tall and erect, shooting it out with Devlin. The foreman staggered away and Monty appeared unharmed. Devlin

was not dead, as he still held his gun, so Dan finished the dangerous Crexall man. Obie Ferris seized his guns and began popping away.

It was highly touchy work, with friend and ally mixed, and the war fever on them all. Margot had picked up her light rifle where her captors had dropped it and was shooting at some men who had ridden towards them.

Monty fired at Lil Slaughter and he doubled over and remained still. The three most dangerous gunmen had been killed in the opening fire. Dan ran forward. The horsemen were turning away under Margot's fire. Dan sent his two last shots looping at them and threw away the borrowed gun.

He searched eagerly for Ty Crexall. He belted a man with his fist and as the man staggered, Monty picked him off. Obie was in action, now, sticking close to Margot as though to protect her with his body. It was sudden, complete victory.

But there was no sign of Ty Crexall. Under cover of the action he had gotten clean away. Dan cursed savagely to himself.

Far away, he heard Nightshade whinny a protest, and he began running towards the sound. He saw the rented roan which Margot had ridden get off to a flying start as spurs dug into her flanks. He sent Nightshade pitching around, saw her rein break in the hand of the rider. It was Ty, trying to leave them afoot while he escaped.

Dan whistled and Nightshade whirled back. Flashes came from Crexall's gun as he aimed at the black horse, but Nightshade swerved and Dan was up in the saddle in a single leap. He had one glimpse of Margot in Monty's arms as he brought the gallant black's head around. Then he was riding.

The roan, he knew, was no match for Nightshade. Ty headed for the Creek, hoping to get back to Dodge, which was neutral territory by virtue of Bat Masterson's strong hand. But Nightshade was gaining in every leap. Dan saw Ty turn in the saddle and fire, but Margot had the rifle, and pistol fire from the saddle depended too largely upon chance.

Dan was within twenty yards when Ty tried the gun again. It snapped on an empty cylinder. Dan tightened his knee grip and said, "Come on, you son!" and the horse went flying.

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THEY came alongside, and Ty went for his knife. It was a Bowie, slung between his shoulder blades and he was ready for the bitter end. His teeth gleamed a little in the rising sun, and then Dan was beside him and reaching.

Ty slashed, and the heavy blade ripped Dan's shirt. Then Dan's hand was on his wrist and Ty was dragged sideways from the saddle. Nightshade sheered off, and the roan bolted.

Dan threw his leg over and came willingly from the back of the black. He hit the ground very hard, rolling over and over, but he did not let go of the wrist of the hand which held the Bowie.

Ty was still full of fight. Dan used leverage, and as they made the last couple of rolls, he threw Ty sprawling. The knife fell between them.

Ty was on one knee. He panted. "I ain't got a weapon, Dan. Nary gun nor knife."

"Does that matter?" asked Dan. "You killed Mike, didn't you?"

"He slapped me across the face. It was about a cow," said Ty. He stood up, a compact man, weighing as much as Dan, though shorter. "He slapped me and took my gun."

"You bushwhacked him," said Dan.

"It so happened that way," said Ty, "that I wanted Margot."

"That's why you came all the way down to join Blackie Rover and took a shot at me," said Dan. "I've got your diamond."

"Use it for a pin for Margot—if you live," said Ty. "Come on; start something!"

Dan said, "Bare hands, Ty."

He dropped his gun belt and went forward, lightly, on the balls of his feet. Crexall crouched and came to meet him. They faced each other.

Then Ty's right hand dropped and came up bearing a derringer. Dan dove under it like a sunfishing bronch. The gun roared viciously. Dan felt the bullet range down his back as he struck Ty's knees.

He had the use of his hands, he found immediately, although his legs seemed to drag curiously. He was able to pin Ty down, despite the wriggling convulsion of the shorter man's body. He got his fingers on Ty's throat.

They pitched about for hours, it seemed. Ty couldn't even curse, now. Dan's fingers were like steel hobbles, pinching his larynx, cutting off all sound save Dan's own heavy breathing.

"Almost a white man!" Dan was panting. "Almost ready to fight clean! But not quite. A dirty streak in you, Ty!"

Ty's legs kicked up, then drummed on the ground. Dan felt the white hatred rise in him and threw the entire weight of his body over. "You were goin' to give Monty a set of blanks! I know it now!" he said. "You had it planted on Chink. Chink might have got one of us if it wasn't for those blanks!"

He squeezed, throwing Ty, as a terrier throws a rat. The heels beat a tattoo. Then all was very still, and Nightshade was nuzzling his shoulder and the blood was beginning to get sticky on his body. He got to his knees, but it was no dice. His legs were gone.

★

HE CLUNG to the stirrup, and Nightshade stood patiently, wondering. Ty Crexall did not move nor breathe. Dan waited, his head spinning.

Ty Crexall was dead, he decided finally. It was a job that had to be done. He stared at his hands, remembering the time he had counted the deaths which he thought he must deal.

Well, it was ended now. He had to get back to Margot and Monty. He had to explain a lot of things. He had to assure them about the future. It had been a raw deal for them all the way through. It wasn't fair. . . .

He made a superhuman effort, and dragged himself up. His wound started bleeding again, but he had to regain the saddle. He got an arm hooked over the pommel, but his legs were iron weights without feeling. . . .

They found him like that, with Nightshade taking tentative steps and Dan hanging on. Bat Masterson was there, somehow or other, alone, but with several Bar V horses he had caught up en route.

They eased Dan to the ground and he said, "I got the Big B all tied up—thought you were the one that killed Mike. . . . Sorry, Monty. . . . Very sorry. It was Ty all the time. But I got it straight. The Big B's yours. . . ."

Obie Ferris said, "Well, the son! He's the one had you hawg-tied, boss!"

Dan said, "I did it. Mike—Mike was a good man. . . ."

Margot had his head in her lap. She said swiftly, "Mike used to bring me eggs. He was so kind. We were fond of Mike, Dan. Monty was only discussing things with him. That night . . . Monty never knew who killed him."

"I dunno yet," said Dan. Joe Coe, Carey, Williams . . . or Ty. Killed 'em all. I'm a killer, Margot—a killer!"

Bat Masterson said, "Bullet ran down his spine, but didn't go in. Paralyzed him, I reckon. He'll get over it, the tough son!"

So they all went away except Monty and Margot. Monty said, "I perfectly well understand it, old man. I've lost nothing at all, you know. If we have the Big B—you and me—and Manville will buy. . . ."

"Don't need him," said Dan sleepily. "Got the money to swing it. It's yours."

Monty tapped Margot's shoulder and grinned and followed the others. Margot said, "*Ours,* you mean, Dan!"

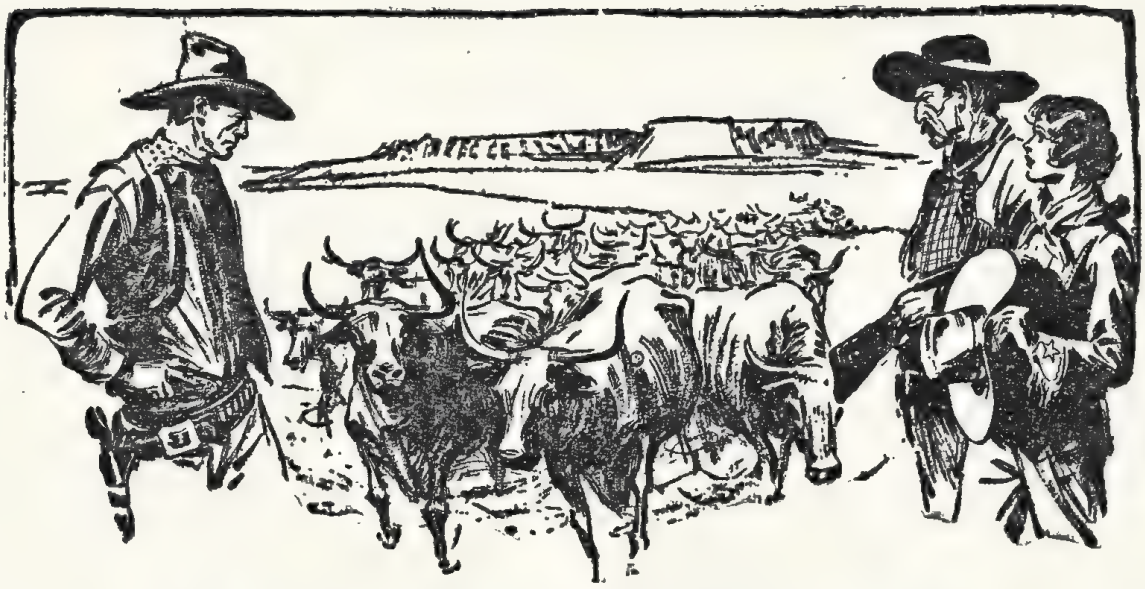
"Ours?" said Dan. "I'm a killer. With my hands—specially this one."

She took it in both of hers and kissed each finger. Then she said. "Montana will be new. We can start all over up there. It will be good, starting over, with new hope and faith and life."

She cradled his head while he drifted off. She had asked for life—for a chance to keep on fighting—and it had been given her. She could look at the lump which was Ty Crexall's dead body and draw Dan closer, thinking only that it may have been the last of the Trannicks.

She blushed in the moonlight, thinking fiercely that now there would be more Trannicks—one once more named Mike. . . .

THE END



Up the Trail

FROM time to time it's been our pleasure to introduce to the readers of *Star Western* some of the men who are writing its stirring frontier fiction stories. The vast majority of them not only know the West; they are of it. They have heard from that fast-disappearing legion of old-time cowmen and punchers the true tales of the dramatic days that faded when the big cattle trails were ploughed under; they have been steeped in the traditions of the open range, of the thundering hoofs of a sudden midnight stampede when a man's life was measured in brief seconds and depended on the quick instinct of his cow-pony. . . .

We think it's high time to introduce one of our writing Texans, Fred Gipson, one of whose stories are in this issue. This brief sketch, it's only fair to say, was written by Fred's good friend, Bill Manning, of Austin, who claimed that Fred was too bashful to tell anything about himself. Fred, however, didn't concur; he said that mebbeso he was just too plain lazy, and besides, he's just heard of a new stream where the trout gave evidence that they'd like nothing better than to feast on a new dry fly that Fred had been fixing up.

Fred Gipson, gents:

Fred Gipson's folks were pioneers, and he was born in a two-room shack under a big mesquite, that's still standing on the side of a catclaw slope two miles from Mason, Texas.

As a shaver, Fred ran barefooted through grass-burrs and prickly pear, chasing lizards and cottontails until his bare feet were so tough they would knock sparks from flintrock and brad down sharp burrs.

Fred wanted to be a bronc-peeler, like the tough bunch of cowhands that choused cattle through the brush in his home country. But a jug-headed broomtail changed that when he was sixteen.

That hoss quit the ground with saddle leather popping. Fred spurred at a shoulder that wasn't there, grabbed for nubbin that he missed, and then found himself sitting out there in the middle of a dusty corral with a corn cob clutched in his fist. Part of his feather edge haircut was peeled off, together with a little head skin. . . . The broomtail was climbing out over the corral, still bawling, the last Fred could remember. Fred says he maybe could translate that jug-head's language, but it would be too full of fireworks for home consumption.

Young Gipson decided then that writing about bronc-peelers would be a whole lot easier and safer than being one. So he rolled up his other shirt in

1933 and hung out at the University of Texas for three and a half years to find out how this word-wrangling business is done.

Nobody in the University could tell Fred just exactly how it was done in order to bring back checks, but there were plenty of pretty co-eds. So, Fred says, we messed around with words and women, having little luck with either, plugging away in the school of journalism and finally decided to try the newspaper game.

While writing a daily feature column for a couple of Texas newspapers, the *Corpus Christi Caller* and *San Angelo Standard-Times*, Fred had a chance to prowl around all over South and West Texas, listening to and writing up yarns of old-timers who'd known Texas when it was a cow-country and nothing else. They filled him so full of cow-country lore that something just naturally had to be done about it.

So when Fred's health broke from the grind of keeping up a daily newspaper column and doing regular reporting on the side, (What do those editors want for a man's blood?) he packed up and returned to Mason, his old home town. During the time he was writing for the papers, however, Fred's column came out first in a vote of the paper's popular columns. Those people in South and West Texas still talk about Gipson and his unusual way of writing. Some of them kept scrap books of his newspaper writing.

But Fred noted that the popularity of his column didn't jibe very closely with the figures on his monthly check, so he gave up to rest a frazzled body in the cool hills of Mason county.

In the meantime Fred had accumulated a mighty fine little wife, Tommie Wynn, and was all set to write fiction.

The going wasn't so easy at first. The couple were down to the bottom of the barrel when he sold a couple of yarns, and soon after, *Star Western* seemed to hanker for more of Fred's stories. The nice little figures on pretty paper kept Fred writing.

Recently, Fred built a little two-room house on the site of the first camp his mother and father made when they came West from East Texas at the turn of the century. And now there's another little Gipson, Philip Michael, chasing through the grass-burrs and prickly pear after lizards and cottontails.

Fred says that his dad never wrote a story in his life, but if ever he—Fred—can learn to write 'em like his dad could tell 'em, he'd smoke two-fers instead of grapevine.

And writing, by the way, is still a hobby with Fred Gipson. His real profession is hunting and fishing. So was his dad's. The elder Gipson could cut down a flying gobbler with a .30-30 rifle with the polished ease that comes only from long years in the outdoors.

And the Number One regret of this writer is that he didn't make one cow-drive up the old Chisholm Trail that cut right through Mason. In Fred's mind there is no adventure in history that can compare with what that must have been.

It's four o'clock now. Fred's tired. After all, he's put in eight hours today—six fishing and two working—and he's tired. So he takes down the old rifle and strolls out across the wild hills. At his heels labors little Mike. . . .

And that, my friends, is Fred Gipson. He enjoys life. He's the sort of fellow you'd like to talk to around a camp fire. He's the sort of fellow who can make a cow-country story get right up on its heels and breathe. And we hope that you'll see more of Fred Gipson in the future. . . .

We're glad to say that Bill Manning's hope will be realized, for in the next issue we'll have another novel by Fred Gipson. Which, by the way, features one of the strangest—and one of the riskiest—cattle drives in history, when a stolen herd is driven for miles mostly through swimming water, to the tune of renegade slugs, that certainly put two tough cowpunchers between the devil and the deep, dark sea!

Also, the next issue will feature another novel by Walt Coburn, "Hell's Home Ranch;" plus the return of that loveable rapscallion, Duke Bagley in a new adventure by William R. Cox, and other hard-hitting long Western stories.

The September issue will be published August 11th!

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(Continued from page 6)

saw those races at Dodge, and while these modern horses are fine-bred and can go, I'll take the Western style of running horse everytime—even though they may not be so all-fired fast. I remember Bat Masterson—peace be to him!—losing a thousand dollar roll on his horse in the old days. His face never moved a muscle, but you could guess what he was thinking. He was a great sportsman as well as a great law-officer, one of the few who had education and kindness—and at the same time didn't know what fear was. He liked to gamble and drink—what man don't?—but he was a real straight shooter, in every way. He couldn't have been a friend of old Teddy Roosevelt's if he hadn't been.

Those Dodge City races *were* races. If you were skinny enough—as I was—you could work your way through the crowds and get a real close-up view. Mostly, the cowboys rode their own horses, though some of the Dodge City folks got kids to ride, I believe. You didn't bet in any machine, either. You said to the fellow standing near, "I bet ten dollars that So-and-so's mare can lick the hell out of Jim Smith's horse," and your bet was made. And paid when the race was over, usually at the track. Women—that is, the wives of Dodge folks—figured that horse racing was pretty much a man's business and didn't bother about going out to the races. There was considerable feathers and perfume, but it came mostly from the "district." There was celebratin' and plenty of it—when the race was over, and re-hashes of the races were often settled with guns.

But to me, the greatest horse-race in the history of the world—yes, even including Paul Revere's—was the Pony Express. There was a *real* race—against savage and ruthless enemies, against time, against flood, fire, and storm. And beyond all that, the youngsters who rode the Pony were doing *useful* work!

You couldn't take, for instance, the best horse on the track today and give him to a man like Harry Roff, who started from Sacramento back in April, 1860 on his white pony. He made an

average of twenty miles an hour for the first eighty miles—including at least one change of horses. Two hundred and eighty-five miles from San Francisco, he made Fort Churchill in fifteen hours and twenty minutes. Salt Lake City saw him carrying mail four days out of San Francisco, which took the last stage wagon a full month.

My father used to tell me that there was plenty of horse-race betting in Sacramento before the first west-bound Pony rider came in. The streets were lined with bunting, the saloons were doing a land-office business. Everyone was almost holding his breath, listening for the drumming of the hoof beats that would signal bringing news from "the States"—what they called "Home."

There were messengers all along the line who brought news, of course, of the rider's progress, and he saw a ten thousand dollar bet—in dust—offered and taken that the rider would never make it that day.

But the Pony galloped in at five-twenty, the evening of April twenty-third, 1860, and the ten thousand changed hands before the bar. With drinks for the house on the winning bettor.

It looked like we'd seen the end of the Pony, for about the end of May, it seemed to have dropped out of existence. Riders were long over-due, and you may imagine the worry of the folks who were expecting important news from back home. One of the newspapers said at the time, "The Pony has not yet been heard from, and it is much feared that the little animal has been caught by the Indians."

Well, the Indians were doing a pretty good job. They left Cold Springs Station in ruins. The Express rider, fearing that Roberts Creek Station had also been taken, headed back. All communication east of Sand Springs was cut off. At that time, of course, our soldiers were needed elsewhere for the War Between the States was on. Consequently, the stations were guarded by only two or three men. There was a lot of political hell raised, and finally someone waded through the red tape and some

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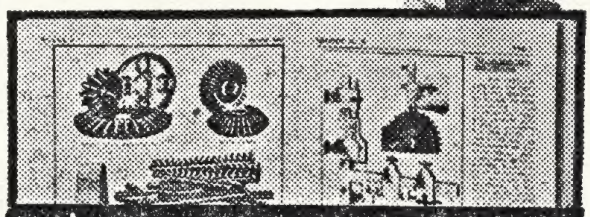

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government home-guards were allocated at the stations.

I always liked the idea of Mr. Ben Fricklin, one of the managers of the Company, who was one of the men that wouldn't be beat. He said, "The more the Indians interfere, the faster we'll travel!"

I must put in here that the same spirit of fight is in all of the young folks today. And I thank God for it.

It was the Pony Express that brought the news of Stephen A. Douglas's nomination against old Honest Abe. The Pony did pretty well after that. They finally got them to make a run of a hundred miles a day. If any of you have rode horseback, I think you'll agree that a hundred miles a day, even with relays spaced some ten or twelve miles apart, is no child's work. Remember that this wasn't any race-track. It was desert and mountainous country.

These riders were carrying the mail. My father claimed he used to know Bill James, who rode a hundred and twenty miles of tough country in twelve hours. That figures down to about ten miles an hour, but just remember that there weren't any automobiles, trains, or planes at that time. These riders were really blazing a trail, over country that even one of these Army jeeps would find tough going. And the Indians were plenty hostile.

Old Colonel Morse spelled the end of the Pony—though he maybe didn't know it when he invented the telegraph. In 1860, July Fourth, forty wagons started out from Fort Churchill into the desert. They carried poles and reels of wire, which would soon replace the thudding hoofs of the immortal Pony Express. They rigged up twenty-five poles to the mile. And pretty soon, Washington and New York were talking to San Francisco and Sacramento. And the youngster who rode the Pony had something else to do. Well, that was the kind of horse race that really counts.

Mr. Williamson, we'd like to hear from you again. And from anyone else who has anything to say about the famous Pony Express.

The Gunsmoke Smiths

And here's a query from Pfc. Frank Smith of Fort Benning, Ga. All right, Private Smith, take it:

Dear Strawboss:

There are a lot of us Smiths in the world, and I happen to be one whose antecedents go back to the Old West. . . . I'm not sure if the well-known Tom Smith Abilene is a distant relative of mine, but I've always been an admirer of the kind of guy who can look a gun in the face and then slap him down. Recently I've heard of another Tom Smith who was a marshal. Do you know whether they're the same?

There were two Tom Smiths who were frontier law-officers, Frank. Everyone knows about the Thomas J. Smith, marshal of Abilene, who didn't take anything from anybody after he put forth his famous dictum that no guns were to be carried in that roaring cow-town.

Marshal Smith could hit—and hard—with his fists. And he hit first. His tragic death was caused by his believing that all men were as square as he was. He was shot by a murderer, who couldn't have cleaned his spurs.

There was another Tom Smith, also a marshal, and a later one. According to Bill Raine, he also was quite a gent. A Texan, he lived up to the tradition of the Lone Star State by being a good fighter. He was a trouble-shooter in the real hot-lead tradition. Sometimes he might not have always been on the right side, but he cleaned up a lot of towns that needed a six-shooter sweeping.

Maybe some other member of our Branding Corral crew can tell some more about the two famous marshals by the name of Smith. Any takers?

Thanks a lot, gents. And we'll see you all again next month.

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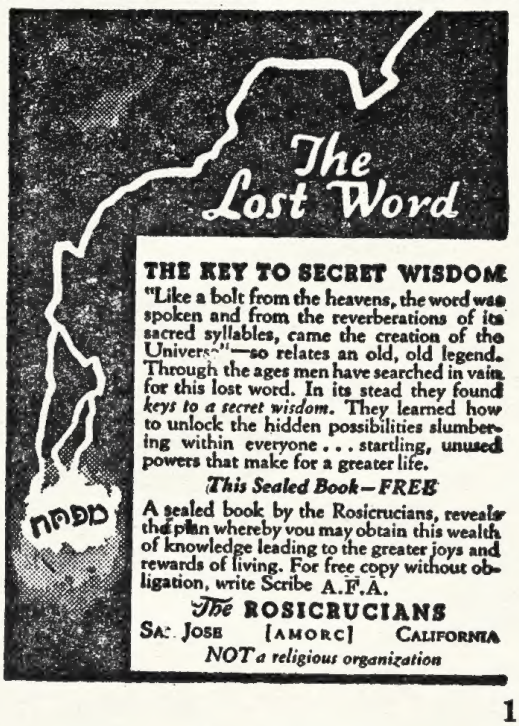

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